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Randolph Blackwell and the Economics of Civil Rights

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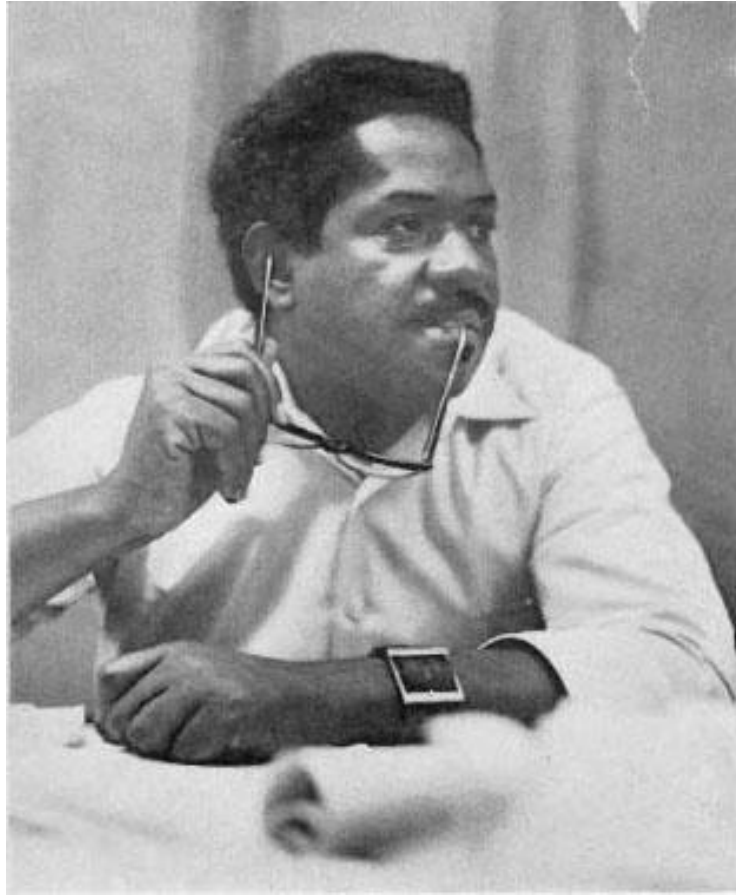
ALEC FAZACKERLEY HICKMOTT, MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

RANDOLPH BLACKWELL AND THE ECONOMICS OF CIVIL RIGHTSSUMMARY

The life of Randolph Blackwell (1927-1981) provides a new lens through which to view the evolution of African American politics during the 20th century. Though perhaps most recognizable as a member of Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Blackwell's career as an activist had dimensions far broader than that of non-violent resistance. Most importantly, Blackwell's thought and praxis suggests the centrality of an economic and class-rooted analysis that endured far beyond the halcyon days of the Popular Front during the 1930s and 1940s. Through the medium of biography, this thesis charts the trajectory of Blackwell's political life. Beginning with his influence of his father—a member of Marcus Garvey's UNIA—Blackwell's journey intersected with some of the most foundational institutions and organisations shaping African American politics during the period under consideration, including Henry Wallace's Progressive Party of the late 1940s, the NAACP, the Voter Education Project and the SCLC. This thesis also ventures into uncharted territories, particularly in its description of Blackwell's post-civil rights career. In 1966, Blackwell founded Southern Rural Action, a non-profit private organisation dedicated to the cause of working class empowerment in some of the most impoverished counties in the South. Delineating Blackwell's unique, geographically centered vision of southern rebirth between 1966 and 1977, this thesis provides the first account of a long-ignored chapter in the history of "civil rights" organizing in the post-King years. Finally, Blackwell's work for the Federal Government as head of the Office of Minority Business Enterprise is given its due consideration.

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1. Randolph Blackwell, Ebony Magazine, 1975

Introduction

On the 16th of August 1966, Martin Luther King, Jr. sat down to write to a departing member of his staff. In a long, weary and at times despairing letter, King revealed his deep sense of sadness and remorse for allowing a vital member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to resign their post. “I have written to you a thousand times in my mind,” King wrote, “but I am just getting to the point of putting it on paper.” In a letter that was clearly a long time in coming, King admitted that “Ever since I received your letter requesting a year’s leave, I have been intending to talk with you. I cannot begin to explain the great burden of my schedule, the impossible day-to-day demands that confront my life, and the endless travel that keeps me wondering whether I am coming or going.” With great regret, King pleaded that behind his “apparent negligence is only surface; beneath the surface is a well-intentioned heart that cannot always be implemented into actual doings. So accept this belated missive as a significant expression of what I have wanted to say for several weeks.”¹

The recipient of this letter was Randolph T. Blackwell, the soon to be ex-Program Director of the SCLC. Having served diligently in the capacity since his appointment in 1964, Blackwell was leaving King’s organisation to take up a position with the Citizen’s Crusade Against Poverty (CCAP), a newly formed group dedicated to the fight against economic inequality. As King’s letter makes clear, the loss was considered a sizeable one. Clearly heartbroken at Blackwell’s decision to leave, King reminded him of his crucial value to the organisation: “I want to say what a great loss it will be to SCLC to have you away from us for a year,” King wrote. “You came to the Conference bearing great gifts of a

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr. to Randolph T. Blackwell, 16 August 1966, King Papers, general correspondence.

brilliant mind, dedicated spirit, a keen insight into the political and economic issues confronting our movement, and above all, an unswerving devotion to the cause of freedom and human dignity.” Cognizant of the reasons behind Blackwell’s decision to leave, King also made space to apologize vociferously for the problems that had beset SCLC during his trusted aide’s tenure; issues that had ultimately convinced him that his role in the struggle lay elsewhere. As King acknowledged, “there were certainly moments when you were frustrated and even bewildered as a result of non-existent structural and organizational foundations that should have existed.” Concluding on a note of hope, King suggested that “if we did not provide every aspect of harmony that you expected, I do hope that you gained consolation from the fact that you started a process that will continue to lead us in the right direction.”²

Though ostensibly departing for only a year’s leave of absence, King’s words suggested he knew Blackwell would not be returning. The letter concludes with him bidding farewell to his ally: “Let me wish for you a most fruitful and challenging time in your new responsibility. Because of your unique qualifications, your overall skills, and your insatiable desire to see poverty eradicated from our society, I know that you will do a herculean job.” Movingly, King informed his friend that “Since we in SCLC will still be working in numerous valleys of misery and injustice with limited hands and resources, I hope that we can call on you from time to time to aid us in some of your spare moments. I can assure you that we still need you and I hope you will not forget us ... May God continue to bless you in all your endeavours.”³ Blackwell would not be back, however.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

SCLC would continue onwards without a crucial influence on its organisation and operation, and Blackwell would move on to pastures new and fruitful.

King's praise for Blackwell—which was far from unique amongst contemporaries—is by no means reflected in the existing literature on the civil rights movement. In fact, Blackwell's name is largely invisible in the voluminous historical scholarship focused on the period.⁴ Between the three volumes of Taylor Branch's *magnum opus*, David Garrow's encyclopaedic *Bearing the Cross* and Adam Fairclough's history of SCLC, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, Blackwell receives only brief and largely anecdotal mention. Moreover, *We Ain't What We Ought to Be*, Stephen G. Tuck's recent and well regarded synthesis of African American activism contains no mention of Blackwell at all. Between the four historians, the closest any come to assessing Blackwell's influence on the trajectory of the movement is Fairclough's observation that Blackwell was “one of the few laymen to serve on SCLC's executive staff.”⁵ As such, this study—the first to focus explicitly on the career of Blackwell—should be understood at its most basic level as an act of historical recovery that restores its subject to a place in narratives of both the civil rights movement and African American activism.

Blackwell's life in the struggle encompassed far more than his time at SCLC, however. Born in 1927, Blackwell's career as an activist, organizer, intellectual, educator, businessman and public official dovetails with many of the crucial themes animating

⁴ There are exceptions to this rule, however. Blackwell appears fleetingly in a number of works, including William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Susan Youngblood Ashmore, *Carry It On: The War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama, 1964-1972* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008); Stephen G. Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia, 1940-1980* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001).

⁵ Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 4.

scholarship on African American history in the twentieth century. But in a number of respects, this biographical study harkens back to a largely unfashionable era of civil rights scholarship. Focused around a single personality—if a largely forgotten one—this account takes a civil rights leader as its central subject. Such studies are easy to come by. As Steven Lawson has noted, the first generation of civil rights scholarship focused on issues of leadership and the development of events at the national level, whilst remaining insulated from contemporary developments in the field of social history centred on issues of class, gender and race.⁶ The notion that biography provides an effective means to understand the civil rights movement has retained significant currency, however. Works focused on King are too numerous to fully list, whilst many of the most visible participants of the movement—such as Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, Fred Shuttlesworth and Robert F. Williams—have all been the subject of sophisticated studies.⁷

The methodological salience of such top-down studies has not been left unchallenged, however. During the 1980s and 1990s, numerous histories emerged that highlighted the experiences of local, grass-roots organizing. In works such as Charles Payne's *I've Got the Light of Freedom* and John Dittmer's *Local People*, the voices of movement participants began to emerge more clearly, delineating “everyday” narratives of the struggle that—such historians argued—spoke with far greater accuracy to the realities

⁶ Steven F. Lawson, “Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement,” *The American Historical Review* 96, no. 2 (April 1991), 456–457.

⁷ For just a sampling of such works, consult Thomas F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Andrew M. Manis, *A Fire You Can't Put Out: The Civil Rights Life of Birmingham's Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001); Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

of political participation in the South.⁸ A perspective given its seminal articulation by Payne, such accounts proceeded from the assumption that the contributions of the dispossessed to the history of the movement had been consistently undervalued. As Payne argued in a postscript entitled “The Social Construction of History,” “it is crucial to have a clear sense of the great price paid by people at the bottom to make change possible ... Uncritically granting primacy to changes in social norms enshrines the view-point of the privileged as self-evident.”⁹

More recently, scholars have attempted to build on the conceptual interventions of “local” studies by expanding the definition of the “civil rights movement” itself. Increasingly, historians have expanded both the temporal and spatial boundaries of the scholarship, whilst arguing that the goals of the movement could not be reduced to its legislative successes or a constitutionalist framework of equal rights. Advocating for a “long” civil rights movement,” Jacquelyn Dowd Hall has encouraged historians to challenge the “classical” definition of the struggle, traditionally confined to a period between 1954 and 1965, during which the movement’s goals were coherently defined along a narrow legislative agenda. Echoing Payne, Hall argued that “By confining the civil rights struggle to the South, to bowdlerized heroes, to a single halcyon decade, and to limited, noneconomic objectives, the master narrative simultaneously elevates and diminishes the

⁸ Prominent examples of this historiographical shift include John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995); Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Aldon D. Morris, *Origins of the Civil Rights Movements*, 1st ed. (New York: Free Press, 1986); Youth Of The Rural Organizing & Cultural Center, *Minds Stayed On Freedom: The Civil Rights Struggle In The Rural South—An Oral History* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991).

⁹ Payne, 422.

movement.”¹⁰ For Hall and other such proponents, the dominant view of the “movement” can be traced to the particular, largely ideological imperatives of historical production in American society that have sought to diminish and circumscribe the meanings and sources of African American protest during the 1950s and 1960s. By contrast, Hall emphasizes a movement “that took root in the liberal and radical milieu of the late 1930s, was intimately tied to ‘the rise and fall of the New Deal order,’ accelerated during World War II, stretched far beyond the South ... and in the 1960s and 1970s inspired a ‘Mass of Movements’ that deifies any narrative of collapse.”¹¹

How then does a biography of Randolph Blackwell fit into this evolution of civil rights scholarship? Superficially, Blackwell’s narrative reinforces the basic presumptions of the “long” movement. On numerous occasions, Blackwell would remind listeners of the importance of the New Deal era, remarks that emerged not simply from nostalgia but in fact represented a crucial touchstone in his understanding of the future direction of African American politics. Indeed, Blackwell gained early political experience in Henry Wallace’s Progressive Party campaign of 1948, where he ran voter registration both in Greensboro and rural Georgia. In this sense, the career of Blackwell adds weight to the argument put forward by Nelson Lichtenstein and Robert Korstad, who have located nascent civil rights struggles in the New Deal era as organized labour increased its influence within African American communities.¹² And though sympathetic to the political praxis of the Popular Front, Blackwell’s decision to join the SCLC reinforces the conclusion that many who

¹⁰ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005), 1234.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1235.

¹² For the seminal articulation of the civil rights movement’s roots in New Deal America, see Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, “Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement,” *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 3 (December 1988): 786-811.

could trace their formative political development to the 1930s and 1940s had found very different homes by the late 1950s and 1960s.

Blackwell's narrative comports to narratives of the long movement in other regards, too. Perhaps most notably, his career in the struggle extended well beyond the "traditional" end of the movement. Continuing his activism into the late 1970s, Blackwell attempted to address issues of rural development and African American industry, particularly in the South. Founding Southern Rural Action (SRA) in 1966, Blackwell transitioned to a post-civil rights world in which the means and goals of African American empowerment had changed considerably. In addition, other strands of long movement scholarship—most notably in the work of Timothy Tyson—have sought to flatten the distinctions between "Civil Rights" and "Black Power." Channelling the economic legacies of Booker T. Washington and Marcus Mosiah Garvey in a quest for African American empowerment, Blackwell could very well be used as a straw man for such a historiographical position. Suggesting the falsity of any analytical binary separating interpretations of "Civil Rights" from those concerned with "Black Power," Blackwell remained comfortable with both King's doctrine of non-violent resistance and theories of African American self-determination, particularly in the economic sphere.

The conceptual framework of the "long movement" can also prove limiting, however. Indeed, the general proposition of this standpoint—one that has enjoyed a great deal of acceptance and influence—has only recently begun to come under any serious scrutiny. As Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang have suggested, the theoretical foundations of such studies have in fact de-historicised the newly-christened field of "black freedom studies." As they write, "We question the adequacy of the Long Movement thesis

because it collapses periodisation schemas, erases conceptual differences between waves of the BLM [Black liberation movement], and blurs regional distinctions in the African American experience.”¹³ Comparing the existing historical framing to that of a vampire—undead, outside of time, place and ultimately history—Cha-Jua and Lang suggest that for the field to move forward, “We need an historical-theoretical framework ... one that is mindful of political, economic, spatial, ideological, discursive, and cultural factors, as well as subjective activity, in shaping paradigms of African American resistance in consistent, though contextually specific, ways across time and space.”¹⁴

Engaging the historical inadequacies of the “long movement” thesis are particularly pertinent to the life of Randolph Blackwell. Implicit in the title of Korstad and Lichtenstein’s article, “Lost Opportunities,” is the assumption that a particular form of political activity—one rooted around an analysis of economic issues, and cognizant of the centrality of a healthy labour movement in the cause of African American working class advancement—irrevocably dwindled following the failure of the Popular Front in the late 1930s and 1940s. Further cementing the ascendance of this general proposition, Risa Goluboff has used NAACP legal department records to chart a shift in the focus of civil rights strategy from economic issues in the South to the more commonly understood paradigm of equal access and opportunity. In *The Lost Promise of Civil Rights*, Goluboff argues that “the problems of African American workers disappeared [in the early 1950s] from the most influential civil rights practice at a pivotal moment in civil rights history, and

¹³ Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, “The “Long Movement” as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies,” *Journal of African American History* 92, no. 2 (Spring 2007), 265-288.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 283.

our civil rights doctrine has largely failed to address the kind of material inequality black workers endured.”¹⁵

In numerous ways, the life of Randolph Blackwell demonstrates that an attention to economic issues within African American politics was not coextensive with the waning interest of the NAACP legal department. Indeed, Goluboff’s notion of an opposition between “economic” and “civil rights” activism is complicated by the fact that Blackwell was heavily involved in the preparation of the *Brown vs. Board of Education* case whilst studying law at Howard University in the early 1950s.¹⁶ Addressing this general theme of the continuing salience of economic analysis within the civil rights movement, Thomas Jackson has recently argued in *From Civil Rights to Human Rights* that the imprint of Marxism and the Social Gospel were foundational in the thought of Martin Luther King.¹⁷ Challenging existing interpretations that viewed King’s leftward shift as a relatively late development, Jackson suggests that to fully understand the evolution of SCLC’s leader, one has to grasp that the interpolation of race and class had long been at the centre of his political consciousness. And so it was with Blackwell. A man who retained allegiances to the class-focused politics of an earlier era, Blackwell pushed the organisation at the heart of the “classical” civil rights movement—the Southern Christian Leadership Conference—to pursue programmes that were fundamentally economic in nature. In particular, Blackwell was central in the creation of both SCLC’s department of Economic Affairs and its Dialogue Department, the latter of which was dedicated to forging links with working class whites in the South.

¹⁵ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 15.

¹⁶ Randolph T. Blackwell, “Perspective on the Brown Decision,” *New South*, Vol. 28, No.1 (Winter, 1973).

¹⁷ Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*.

Blackwell's emphasis on economic issues was never purely theoretical, however. By contrast, his thinking about working class empowerment emerged from more prosaic interactions with the black status quo in North Carolina during the mid-1940s. A precocious activist whose efforts began whilst he was still in his teenage years, Blackwell attempted to confront what he perceived as a staid black leadership class in his home town of Greensboro. Crucially, Blackwell attempted to broaden African American political participation in local affairs by challenging the framework of respectability and accommodation that governed inter-racial relations in the city. Paradoxically, Blackwell's nascent class politics was incubated by the very organisation he sought to challenge: the NAACP. Profoundly influenced by Ella Baker, Blackwell's early activist work was driven by a conviction that working class people—and as many as possible—had to be integrated into any truly democratic project. Crucially, Blackwell believed that the NAACP represented not a barrier to mobilization, dominated as it was by the black Greensboro elite, but could actually serve an institutional vehicle for expanding the dimensions of southern activism.¹⁸ As he phrased it, the NAACP could potentially act as an “umbrella organization” capable of containing and advancing the interests of working class African Americans for whom the prevalent discourses of “respectability” worked to marginalise from political participation.

Though class as a conceptual and political tool was rarely explicit in Blackwell's public pronouncements, it undeniably shaped his understanding of what a viable, and

¹⁸ Over recent years, the existence—and significance—of class tensions within African American communities have received increasing attention. For a sampling of such works, see Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk, Virginia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

effective political praxis would look like, particularly in the South. Rather than accepting a radicalism based on a complete adherence to proscriptive Marxism (or any other reductive ideology or philosophy), Blackwell's "class consciousness" was of a more organic mould, one attuned to the need for working class empowerment but deeply informed by the larger political, social and economic contexts that complicated the search for any potential "proletarian" insurgency.¹⁹ Despite pursuing inter-racial cooperation during his time at SCLC, Blackwell was perfectly capable of shifting gears. In the post-civil rights era, Blackwell's concerns were largely directed toward geographical and social spaces dominated—demographically, at least—by working class African Americans. In Blackwell's mind, "integration" could coexist with economic autonomy and self-determination; to suggest the paradoxical nature of such a position would have seemed foreign to Blackwell, to say the least.

At a basic level, the career of Randolph Blackwell suggests his interests lay in helping to create a civil rights movement of far greater complexity and social vision than one driven simply by a desire to convince America to live up to its own stated, constitutional ideals. Though Blackwell's approach to African American politics was undoubtedly influenced by his experience, and memories of New Deal America, the era was not his only source of inspiration. By contrast, Blackwell's political and intellectual universe was informed by historical antecedents of African American activism largely ignored in studies of the civil rights era. In particular, two movements—that of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and the Populists of the

¹⁹ On the limiting affects of Marxism on the conceptual vision of African American radicalism, see Alec Fazackerley Hickmott, "Agrarian in Origin?": African American Radicalism and the Rural South, 1917-1923 (M.A. Thesis, University of Virginia, 2010).

1890s—continued to shape Blackwell’s idiosyncratic vision of African American politics and activism. In the Garvey movement, Blackwell saw the potential of a truly mass movement, and in the efforts of the Populists, Blackwell located the potential of *people* to force politicians to address the basic material issues confronting working class southerners. In many respects, Blackwell’s abiding commitment to political inclusion reveals his interest in forging a form of black populism rooted in a progressive political coalition malleable enough to include organized labour, religious institutions and white southerners, should they chose to get on board. This is not to say that this study is interested in tracing a linear (and ill-defined) line of activism from the 1960s back into the 1920s and even the 1890s. Rather, Blackwell’s life and work suggests that certain commitments—to the economic future of African Americans, inter-racial working class solidarity, racial self-determination and broad-based movement building—were far from contradictory, or antithetical to a civil rights movement given order and coherence by the historical profession.

With his activist career extending into the post-civil rights era, Blackwell also provides a new window into the political phenomena of the post-civil rights era: black power. As Peniel Joseph has pointed out, the burgeoning field of black power scholarship has had to navigate a historical terrain “complicated by conventional civil rights narratives, which, until recently, accepted as wisdom the idea that black power undermined struggles for racial justice.”²⁰ “Given the overwhelmingly negative images associated with black power,” Joseph points out, “efforts to define it have largely been arbitrary ... A clear working definition of black power has proven elusive, especially since it was so often

²⁰ Peniel E. Joseph, “The Black Power Movement: A State of the Field,” *Journal of American History* (Dec. 2009), 751.

viewed as the civil rights movement's evil twin."²¹ In many respects, Blackwell was resistant to the idea, or at least the label of "black power," and often resisted aligning himself with some of the more famous, and articulate proponents of the movement. In large part, this can be understood in light of Blackwell's refusal to alienate communities that he knew were deeply suspicious of the rising spectre of uncontrolled black militancy. As he wrote whilst at SCLC, "Notice, I do not use the phrase "black power." This is avoided because of its connotations of separatism and violence."²²

That said, Blackwell's work with Southern Rural Action dovetails with some of the historiographical revisions currently underway in the field of Black Power Studies. As Joseph writes, black power scholarship has increasingly become "less about iconic leaders and more about new avenues for community organizing that feature previously overlooked and understudied groups ... Critical analyses of the successes, failures, and legacy of the movement's iconic, as well as more obscure organisations and leaders is also necessary."²³ Temporarily abandoning his commitment to the white working class South, Blackwell's activism through the late 1960s and early 1970s focused on the rehabilitation of rural, heavily African American communities that Blackwell believed were the principal heirs of "200 years of discrimination and suppression."²⁴ By working past Blackwell's public disavowals of black power, and focusing on his efforts to address the more prosaic needs of African American communities—work that at its most basic level was conducted in the name of *empowering* working class black people—Blackwell and SRA can and should be read as a new chapter in the history of "black power." Moreover, SRA suggests that black

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Blackwell, "Power for the Powerless—SCLC's Basic Challenge," SCLC Papers, Part 4, box 144, folder 30.

²³ Joseph, "The Black Power Movement: A State of the Field," 773-774.

²⁴ Blackwell, "Out-Migration and Civil Disorder," Speech delivered at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, 16 October 1967, SCLC 4, 144:28.

power had explicitly southern dimensions, a point that has thus far been less than fully explored in the existing literature.²⁵ Last but by no means least, SRA suggests that black power was capable of trenchant economic analyses of American life, and putting concrete solutions into practice. Here again is another facet of the black power less than adequately interrogated by scholars of the movement.

Blackwell's professional career was not solely defined by activism, however. In the long interregnum between his time organizing for the Progressive Party during the late 1940s and his return to civil rights activity with the Voter Education Project in 1963, Blackwell developed into a significant and well-rounded intellectual. Indeed, Blackwell came to the civil rights movement with almost a decade's work in university education behind him. Considering himself first and foremost a social scientist, Blackwell viewed southern race relations through a prism of empiricism, intellectual deliberation and careful study. Trained in law, economics and sociology, Blackwell approached the problem of African American politics with the utilitarian—and, some would say, liberal—conviction that problems, if given due consideration, could be indentified and solved.²⁶ Blackwell also had radical roots, however. Having studied at Howard University in the early 1950s, Blackwell was an intellectual descendent of a corpus of black scholars associated closely with that institution, including the political scientist Ralph Bunche, the economist Abram

²⁵ Much of the most recent, and innovative work on Black Power has remained confined to the urban North and West. See Jeanne F. Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Matthew J. Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Peniel E. Joseph, *Neighborhood Rebels: Black Power at the Local Level*, 1st ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). For an intriguing investigation of black power's cultural expressions in the South, see James Edward Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 319-66.

²⁶ For an analysis of American Liberalism's roots in the Progressive era, see Shelton Stromquist, *Reinventing "The People": The Progressive Movement, the Class Problem, and the Origins of Modern Liberalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

Harris, and the sociologist E. Franklin Frazier.²⁷ In her history of the evolution of black labour studies, *The Segregated Scholars*, Francille Wilson concludes by pondering “Why didn’t a new generation of black labor historians emerge after 1950?”²⁸ Though certainly not in the vanguard of any identifiable wave of like-minded intellectuals, Blackwell’s persistent concerns with issues of political economy, jobs and the continuing utility of organised labour suggest that Wilson’s story has perhaps an additional coda to be completed.

As the 1960s progressed, Blackwell’s concern with the problem of African American employment took on an increasingly long range cast. In particular, Blackwell—almost uniquely amongst contemporary black activists—was deeply concerned with the evolution of technology and its implications for a restructured American economy. Most visibly in his work on new energy solutions in the late 1970s, but appearing as a consistent theme throughout his post-SCLC career, Blackwell attempted to equip African American workers for a profitable life in a new economic landscape. Like Marcus Garvey’s Black Star Line of the 1920s, Blackwell believed that African American empowerment lay not solely in “resistance,” protest or organizing but in establishing the economic foundations of community and ultimately, nation building. African Americans, Blackwell argued, had to be incorporated into the economic mainstream of American life, not on terms of exploitation but on the basis of black capital accumulation and meaningful, long-term employment opportunities. This was not the advocacy of pure separatism, but a pragmatic solution to the problems of poverty that continued to afflict the rural South.

²⁷ See Jonathan Scott Holloway, *Confronting the Veil: Abram Harris Jr., E. Franklin Frazier, and Ralph Bunche, 1919-1941* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

²⁸ Francille Rusan Wilson, *The Segregated Scholars: Black Social Scientists and the Creation of Black Labor Studies, 1890-1950* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 252.

Finally, Blackwell's explicit understanding of region—or more specifically, the political and economic centrality of the South—deeply informed the trajectory of his activism. By the mid 1960s, Blackwell was articulating, with great faith, a “new destiny for the South” centred on the social, economic and cultural reconstruction of rural black communities. To rephrase Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's famous formulation, Blackwell was intent on resisting the “metalanguage” of southern life, defined most commonly—both by contemporaries and all too often, historians—as as a region of violence, oppression and cultural backwardness.²⁹ Circumventing the dominant discourses that had historically, and continued to jettison such geographic spaces from any significant place in a redeemed southern landscape, Blackwell argued vigorously that the project of redefining the terms of African American life *had* to begin in the rural and black South. Tying the problems of urban disorder in the urban North to the exodus of disinherited African Americans from the region, Blackwell's “economics of place” was both a radical revision of contemporary public policy debates and a concrete praxis that offered new futures for the lives of some of the nation's most deprived “citizens.”

²⁹ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race,” *Signs* 17, no. 2 (Winter 1992), 251-274. For a recent example of one reconsideration of the meaning and people of the South, as articulated in the work of Zora Neale Hurston, see Tiffany Ruby Patterson, *Zora Neale Hurston and a History of Southern Life*, 1st ed. (Temple University Press, 2005).

1 *The Making of a Civil Rights Leader, 1927-1964*

Born on the 10th of March, 1927 in Greensboro, Randolph was but the latest in a long line of North Carolina Blackwells. Randolph's paternal grandfather, Rufus, was born in 1859 into slavery, and lived through the revolutions of freedom, Reconstruction and Redemption. Randolph's father, Joe, was born on January 18, 1889, in Ruffin, North Carolina, a tiny hamlet only a short trip across the border from Danville, Virginia.³⁰ At some point early in his life, Joe—who was then working as a labourer—moved his young family from Greensboro to Wise, Virginia. Now married to Blanche Blackwell, by 1920 Joe and his wife had four children: James, Alton, Joseph and Rufus (named for Joe's father).³¹ Joe's time in southwestern Virginia included one important diversion: on June 5, 1917, he enlisted in the Armed Forces. As debates swirled amongst African American intellectuals in the North about whether it was appropriate for black men to serve in World War I, Joe went ahead signed up for the venture.³² As his army registration card shows, Joe was five foot and eight inches in height, and of medium build. Predicting his future political loyalties, Joe chose to designate his racial identity as "African."³³

By 1930, Joe and Blanche had returned to Greensboro, and had rounded out their family with four more children: three sons, Edgar, Randolph and Gilbert, and a daughter,

³⁰ This information was acquired through the use of ancestry.com

³¹ *US Census of Population and Housing, 1920: Virginia*. Gladeville, Wise, Roll T625_1918; Page: 51A; Enumeration District: 172; Image: 498 (Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29, National Archives, Washington, D.C), accessed through ancestry.com, 10 July 2010.

³² *World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918*, registration Location: Wise County, Virginia, Roll 1991379, Draft Board: 0, Draft Card B, 443. [database on-line]. Provo, UT, accessed through ancestry.com, 10 July 2010.

³³ *Ibid.*

Linnet.³⁴ Of these eight Blackwell children, six would go on to attend college, no mean feat for a working family that could never count themselves amongst the affluent segment of the African American community in Greensboro. Clearly a proud family, the Blackwells—despite often meagre means—strived to live free of subservience to whites. Joe even went as far as to vividly dramatize this in front of his children. On one particular occasion, Joe bravely stood up to a white foreman who was attempting to intimidate him. Moreover, Joe refused to allow his children to hold jobs that placed them under the control of whites, such as a shoe-shine boy.³⁵ As Blackwell recalled, both of his parents aspired to a future free from economic dependence on a white pay check. By this point, Joe had acquired a job as a railroad worker,³⁶ but his plans for the future revolved around ownership of his own coal yard.³⁷

Such dreams of self determination should perhaps come of no surprise. At some point during the 1920s, Joe Blackwell had become acquainted with the African American political phenomena of the decade: the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and its charismatic leader, Marcus Mosiah Garvey. As scholars have recently shown, Garveyism was a truly national and mass movement, transcending spatial, geographic and national allegiances.³⁸ In particular, recent interventions have illuminated the depth of

³⁴ 1920 *United States Federal Census*, Census Place: Greensboro, Guilford, North Carolina; Roll 1695; Page: 10B; Enumeration District: 41; Image: 432.0 (Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29, National Archives, Washington, D.C), accessed through ancestry.com, 10 July 2010.

³⁵ Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, 27, 31.

³⁶ William H. Chafe, "Presidential Address: "The Gods Bring Threads to Webs Begun"," *The Journal of American History* 86, no. 4 (March 2000), 540.

³⁷ Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, 360.

³⁸ In particular, see Claudrena N. Harold, *The Rise and Fall of the Garvey Movement in the Urban South, 1918-1942* (London: Routledge, 2007); Jarod Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion: Labor and Religion in the New Cotton South*, 1st ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Mary G. Rolinson, *Grassroots Garveyism: The Universal Negro Improvement Association in the Rural South, 1920-1927* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

Garveyite activity in the South, rejecting older interpretations that viewed the UNIA's base as being primarily in the urban North.

Attempting to harness the militant spirit of the post-World War I era, Garvey visited the South on numerous occasions between 1918 and 1924. Often pursuing spaces of existing African American activism (often related to labour conflict), Garvey refused to exclude the region from his organisation's programmatic goals. By contrast, the leader of the UNIA believed wholeheartedly that the repression and racism of the region could act as an inducement to organisation, rather than a hindrance.³⁹ And in 1922, Garvey ventured southwards to visit the Blackwells' home turf. Speaking at the North Carolina Negro State Fair in Greensboro, Garvey's speech was an incendiary one. As a correspondent for the Greensboro *Daily Record*—a local white newspaper—described the scene, “This chunky West Indian ... held a big open air crowd in thrall this afternoon. Against a heavy northwest wind which swept constantly recurring train noises across the grounds at Floral Hall, his ponderous mouth opened to beat back the roar of rolling stock and grinding organs.”⁴⁰ Reinforcing his economic philosophy, Garvey reminded his listeners of the virtues of life in the segregated South, where black business ownership was encouraged. As the *Negro World* reported, “the South, he declares, [is] the only place in the white world in which there is a semblance of Negro opportunity. The white man drives the black to have grocery stores, manufactories, churches, schools, and hotels of his own.”⁴¹

Though Joe Blackwell may or may not have attended this particular speech, the strength and influence of the UNIA was clearly growing within the state. Over the course of

³⁹ Harold, 20.

⁴⁰ Greensboro *Daily Record*, quoted in “Marcus Garvey Excoriates Race Down in North Carolina,” *The Negro World*, 11 November 1922.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

the next decade, more than fifty divisions of the UNIA would be formed in North Carolina. By Mary Rolinson's count, the Greensboro Division would number over five hundred members, a size which would rank it as only sixteenth largest in the state.⁴² Indeed, a later branch report stated that activity in Greensboro had been largely dormant until 1928, with only "a few faithful members struggling to keep alive the spirit of Negro freedom under the banner of the Red, the Black and the Green."⁴³ But following an organizing trip from a Garvey aide, Samuel Haynes, and a move from the "notorious" East side of Greensboro to new headquarters on South Ashe Street, the division was infused with new, youthful membership, including students from North Carolina Agricultural & Technical University.⁴⁴ In particular, the division was interested in developing means to make Garveyism more attractive to the local black community. All in all, the division had been given a new lease of life. As one member reported, "our future is bright, and with honest and capable leadership we hope soon to be ranked amongst the most progressive branches in the country."⁴⁵

Contrary to a number of interpretations, Garveyism's place in the fabric of African American political life did not dissipate following the leader's deportation in 1927. In a number of cases, efforts by UNIA members to sustain their organisation continued well into the 1930s. In January 1932 the Greensboro division could be found holding a meeting to raise money for the upkeep of the *Negro World*. But perhaps more significantly,

⁴² See Rolinson, 199. The relative weakness of the Greensboro UNIA division is in all likelihood suggestive of the strength and depth of the existing black leadership class in the city.

⁴³ "News and Views of U.N.I.A. Divisions: Greensboro, N.C.," *Negro World*, 14 July 1928. For a follow up report on Haynes' trip to the South, see "Hon. S.A. Haynes Inspires Members to Go Forward Unafraid With the Work," *Negro World*, 29 September 1928.

⁴⁴ This "new" Greensboro division was invigorated by students from a number of other educational centres, including Dudley High School, the Sedalia Institute and Bennett College.

⁴⁵ *Negro World*, 29 September 1928.

Garveyism's legacy was felt in other—perhaps seemingly contradictory—political ventures. As Claudrena Harold has noted, “Finding new organizational vehicles through which to continue their fight against white supremacy was a way for many black women and men to recover from the profound disappointment brought about by the collapse of the UNIA.”⁴⁶

So it was with both Joe and Randolph Blackwell. The influence of Marcus Garvey and the UNIA on the development of Randolph is difficult to pin to down with any precision, however. The evidence is, at best, anecdotal. But at the very least, Joe's experience with the UNIA cemented a distinct race consciousness within the Blackwell home. Born in the year of Garvey's deportation from the US, Randolph grew up in a household that hung a portrait of a black Christ from the wall.⁴⁷ And in memories of his childhood, Randolph recalled being taken by his father to meetings of the local UNIA branch, where up to fifty members would be present.⁴⁸ Moreover, Randolph had regularly distributed and sold political materials (such as the *Negro World* and its successor, the *Black Man*) in Greensboro as a youth, and could clearly recall being taken on instructional field trips by his father, including one to the prison in Atlanta in which Garvey had been held, and another to a black-owned and staffed insurance company.⁴⁹ For the young Randolph, an education in the dignity of the black race was inseparable from the development of political consciousness and ultimately, a political practice. Reflecting in

⁴⁶ Harold, 117.

⁴⁷ George W. Groh, *The Black Migration: The Journey to Urban America* (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1972), 101.

⁴⁸ Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, 27.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

1973, Blackwell noted that “from almost at the point at which I can walk ... and talk I was involved in something related to social change.”⁵⁰

In particular, the imprint of Garvey and the UNIA is legible in the particular forms of politics both Joe and his son Randolph would pursue through the 1930s and into the 1940s. In his seminal account of black politics in Greensboro, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, William Chafe argues that Randolph Blackwell’s family background placed him firmly in the “activist” camp of two forms of black leadership operating within the city. As Chafe put it, “One was willing to challenge directly the oppressiveness of white power; the other sought to work within the structures of white power for black advancement.”⁵¹

To reduce Garveyism to an instrumental status, a simple stopping point in a trajectory toward “militant” civil rights tendencies is perhaps too simplistic, however. In the Blackwell family, a distinct race consciousness seems to have been accompanied by certain values—economic self reliance, black working class dignity, and a belief in the necessity of widespread political participation—that complicate the characterisation of the Blackwells as simply a family of “activists.” If Garveyism was anything, it was the first truly mass movement amongst African Americans, a political phenomenon that suggested an alternative to the class-specific leadership hierarchies that shaped the direction of black politics.⁵² In particular, Garveyism provided the means for—in the urban South, at least—an increasingly *democratic* black politics that offered to include working men and women in the struggle for racial dignity. In a number of respects, the Blackwell family history

⁵⁰ “Randolph Blackwell Interview with William Chafe,” 5 March 1973, William Henry Chafe Oral History Collection, box 2.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² On the politics of leadership and “uplift,” see Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

suggests the ways in which a class consciousness—formulated as a critique of the inadequacies of political participation in the African American community—was at least one product of African Americans’ experience of Garveyism.⁵³

A focus on the necessity of forging a truly *popular* black politics continued to animate Joe, and increasingly, Randolph. Late in life, Randolph recalled that “the further we got away from 1927 [the year of Garvey’s deportation] the more the need developed to find another umbrella [organisation].”⁵⁴ Increasingly, the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) began to appear a plausible home for a more socially diverse black politics. Though it may seem paradoxical, Joe Blackwell slowly relented to the organisation of integration, bourgeois sensibilities and W.E.B. Du Bois. As Blackwell recalled, “My father who had not particularly liked Du Bois up to this point, having being highly influenced by the Garvey movement, then began to ease in his attitude towards this and by ... ’37 or ’38 was then beginning to feel that that which he couldn’t do through the Garvey movement could possibly be done ... through the NAACP.”⁵⁵

Blackwell’s own entry into the world of African American activism came a few years later in 1944, following a speech given in Greensboro by the NAACP Branch Secretary, Ella Baker. Before Baker’s visit, the Greensboro NAACP resembled many similar branches across the South: largely dormant, with a relatively small membership dominated by members of the local black upper and middle classes. Things would soon change, however. N.L. Gregg, head of the Greensboro branch (and a prominent employee

⁵³ On the convoluted relationship between class politics and the various iterations of black nationalism, see Roderick Bush, *We Are Not What We Seem: Black Nationalism and Class Struggle in the American Century* (New York: NYU Press, 2000).

⁵⁴ Blackwell, “Chafe Interview.”

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

of the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company, then the most powerful black-owned business in the nation) actively campaigned for Baker to spend significant time in North Carolina. Arriving in Greensboro on the 16th of February 1944, Baker would spend two days in the city. As Baker put it regretfully, “I wish I were in a position to remain with the Branch for a longer period but because of the pressure of work in the home office and other engagements, I am afraid that this will be all the time I can give at the present.”⁵⁶ By all accounts, the trip was a great success. As Baker wrote in another letter to Gregg, “Good meetings were held in all the branches I visited after I left Greensboro and I feel confident that North Carolina will more than double its 1943 membership this year. My stay in Greensboro was especially pleasant and I am glad to know that the Ph.D’s found my presentation acceptable.”⁵⁷

The effect on the Greensboro NAACP, as in other places across the South, was electric. As Barbara Ransby has ably shown, Baker was central in drastically increasing NAACP membership throughout the South between 1940 and 1946.⁵⁸ In particular, Baker’s philosophy of challenging existing class hierarchies—such as those very clearly present in Greensboro—would clearly have resonated with those still wedded to those committed to forging a truly mass, cross-class movement in the South. Most tellingly, Baker argued that the existing leadership classes within many African American communities acted as a significant barrier to change. In an anecdote she would frequently evoke, Baker suggested that “they would be against the idea of going to battle for the town drunk who happened to

⁵⁶ “Ella Baker to N.L. Gregg,” 22 January 1944, Papers of the NAACP: Part 26, Selected Branch Files, Series A: The South, Reel 15.

⁵⁷ Ella Baker to N.L. Gregg,” 2 March 1944, NAACP Papers, 26: A, 15.

⁵⁸ Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement.*, 105-147.

have been maybe brutalized when being arrested because, who was he?”⁵⁹ For Baker, a politics rooted in notions of “respectability” that excluded the vast majority of working class African Americans from the struggle was a woefully inadequate means of challenging southern injustice. Rather, the NAACP had to be pushed to simultaneously expand both its base and its agenda. And though Baker may not have known it at the time, her audience included one willing foot-soldier.

Such rhetoric clearly resonated with a young Randolph Blackwell. As he recalled years later of the speech, “I was frankly mesmerized. She spoke of professional preparation, the depths of injustice and the nature of individual commitment.”⁶⁰ And though still in high school, Randolph needed little encouragement to become involved in an increasingly vibrant political milieu in Greensboro. Soon after Baker’s visit, he formed an NAACP Youth Council. Though the Dudley High School Council had only a limited membership (thirty to forty students during his time there), Blackwell’s characterization of the NAACP in the mid-1940s is stressed the ways in which the growth in membership was at least in part explained by the increasing level of class inclusion that characterized its membership. As Blackwell put it, “It was a rapidly developing, growing organization ... memberships in the association were constantly growing, kind of middle class in its leadership, but ... undergirded by low income leadership that gave a lot of time and a lot of energy to the building of the organization.”⁶¹ In the years following Baker’s visit, membership in the branch increased dramatically. In one membership drive alone, 1350 new members were

⁵⁹ Ella Baker, “Interview by Eugene Walker,” 4 September 1974, Southern Oral History Project, accessed at http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/playback.html?base_file=G-0007&duration=03:34:21.

⁶⁰ “The Voice of Protest: Ella Baker, Legend of the Civil Rights Movement,” *Washington Post*, 14 December 1978.

⁶¹ Blackwell, “Chafe Interview.”

added to the rolls. As a bulletin from the drive shows, Blackwell was personally responsible for recruiting 16 new members.⁶²

The mid-1940s was a formative period for Randolph Blackwell. On the 8th of August, 1945, Blackwell followed in the footsteps of his father by joining the US Army. At the age of 18, with four years of high school behind him, Blackwell was sent to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, beginning a tour of duty that would last for six months.⁶³ As has been so often said, experience of service during World War II radicalised African Americans, illuminating the contradictions between fighting a war for democracy abroad whilst experiencing the continuing abrogation of rights on the home front.⁶⁴ Though Blackwell's political consciousness clearly had earlier roots, Blackwell returned from Europe "intent on picking [up] the effort to get Black Citizens registered to vote."⁶⁵

Educational opportunities also beckoned, however. In 1946, Blackwell enrolled at North Carolina Agricultural & Technical University in his home town, a move that facilitated an increased involvement in local politics. Following the model staked out by both his father and Ella Baker, Blackwell immediately sought to challenge black Greensboro leaders who marshalled African American voters into the support of "favoured" white candidates. To that end, a recurring practice of Blackwell and his friends was to attend the rallies of such candidates in African American sections of town and

⁶² "Greensboro Branch Secures Record Membership," *NAACP Papers*, 26:A, 15.

⁶³ *U.S. World War II Army Enlistment Records, 1938-1946* [database on-line]. National Archives and Records Administration. (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2005)

⁶⁴ Though details are sketchy, it appears that Blackwell was involved in significant political activism *before* his service in the army during WWII. Challenging the oft-repeated notion that military experience radicalized the African American freedom struggle, Blackwell related in 1979 that "prior to going into the army, I had been active in community type political activity as we had a few years, maybe a year or two before, fought the battle against the White primaries in the South." See Transcript of Randolph Blackwell Interview by Patricia Sullivan," 22 March 1979, Patricia Sullivan Oral History Collection.

⁶⁵ Blackwell, "Patricia Sullivan Interview."

attempt to put the anointed white politicians on their heels.⁶⁶ As Randolph recalled, “we would always show up and ask questions and rabble-rouse, in a sense. And this was our way of exposing the whole mechanism of being a hired person for this.”⁶⁷

Soon graduating from mere trouble causing to more concerted efforts in the arena of Greensboro politics, Blackwell next worked for the city council campaigns of both Brody McCauley and F.A. Mayfield. In particular, Blackwell’s recollection of the McCauley campaign suggests the ways in which his activism was driven by a desire to extend the boundaries of potential black leadership. McCauley was certainly not a traditional candidate; as Blackwell put it,

Brody was not middle-class black. Brody was kind of shady, questionable, but never convicted or guilty of anything. But he was close enough to that crowd. He ran the pool room. He ran the beer hall. He ran the barber shop. There was some kind of cloud over him, but nothing had ever had any conflict with the law. We—this was this group of college kids again—saw, in the running of Brody, an opportunity to involve people that had not been traditionally thought of as voting citizens. So that by running him we were able to pull the guys out of the pool room and the bars and get them registered. But in terms of image, at that point, with this notion that the right to occupy public office belongs to certain kinds of folk, we ran afoul of the system and we were criticized for it, but we were satisfied in our own minds that this was what needed to be done.⁶⁸

As this anecdote suggests, Blackwell believed that the involvement of a non-traditional candidate served far broader purposes than simple rabble-rousing. In particular, the emergence of new leadership, Blackwell argued, would facilitate the expansion of political participation amongst African American communities in Greensboro, and begin to erode the debilitating stranglehold the prosperous black elite held on the evolution of politics and

⁶⁶ Blackwell, “Chafe Interview.”

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

social policy in the city. In Blackwell's mind, the era of "brokerage" politics between powerful whites and affluent African Americans had to go.⁶⁹

Blackwell's continued involvement in politics whilst still a student at North Carolina A&T was undeniably risky, however. As a land grant college, A&T was in the hands of the North Carolina state legislature, a relationship that, as in many similar instances across the South, worked to dampen nascent African American activism. Blackwell paints a more complicated picture of his time at A&T, however, recalling that the faculty and administration's private desires and public pronouncements were rarely the same. As he put it in 1973, "I know of my own knowledge that there was a kind of yearning inside the leadership of that school for the same kinds of things that would have been called publicly radical."⁷⁰

Blackwell was even able to run for the North Carolina state legislature whilst a student at A&T, a decision that potentially placed both his status as a student and the reputation of the university in jeopardy. As Blackwell recalled, he conducted an aggressive campaign against white Carolinian privilege; "I ran against four of the richest men in the state, and I ran the kind of campaign where I was really tearing them to pieces. I'd do crazy things. It was a college group that sponsored my candidacy and then insisted on street corner campaigning. And in the course of a street corner speech, I would say things like, "Mr. Combs' income last year was fifty-two, fifty-three million dollars after expenses. I

⁶⁹ For an analysis of the impact of "brokerage" politics, see Adolph Reed Jr., *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era*, 1st ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

⁷⁰ Blackwell, "Chafe Interview."

frankly don't think that Mrs. Combs needs a million dollars a week to live off of, considering that you only get forty dollars a week.”⁷¹

On one occasion Blackwell was confronted on campus in the midst of a speech by the A&T President, Dr. Ferdinand Bluford. As Blackwell recalled, he expected to be notified of his expulsion from the university, but instead received a discrete endorsement. Bluford would accept his use of campus facilities for campaigning, but with the caveat that Blackwell would do so without ever asking for formal permission. Blackwell's recollections are testimony to the fraught position administrators were placed in by the burgeoning protests across historically black colleges in the South. As Blackwell put it,

There was a significance in the fact that Bluford was willing to go that far in trusting me that he could tell me what his strategy for survival was. And equally significant, of course, is the fact that he did have that kind of sense of dignity, so that you had a man that was very thoroughly discredited and constantly abused, but a man that also had some of the same yearnings of those of us that were out there raising hell. He had the responsibility of maintaining a college in the face of the kind of opposition that could come to bear, and at the same time trying to protect his own dignity in the process.⁷²

Crucially, Blackwell stayed out of trouble by being a diligent and talented student. Though he felt he had the support of the faculty, Blackwell “studied all the time. I studied very hard and stayed way out front of class, because I didn't want to put teachers in that position. But there was a kind of quiet admiration for me.”⁷³

Perhaps most importantly, the efforts of Blackwell and his student cadre heightened black political participation in Greensboro, building a democratic foundation that would underwrite future electoral successes. As Blackwell put it, “my campaign was very alive ...

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

[a] hard hitting campaign, so that there was a kind of political education that had come out of that experience for the community. It was political education that had come out of [F.A.] Mayfield for the community and out of Brody [McCauley] for the community.”⁷⁴ And though Blackwell lost his election bid, his efforts in the city soon bore fruit. In 1951, Greensboro elected its first African American city councilman: Dr. William Hampton.

The immediacies of local African American politics in Greensboro were not Randolph’s sole preserve during this period, however. In addition, Blackwell became heavily involved with Henry Wallace’s Progressive Party campaign of 1948, when he actively campaigned in both North Carolina and Georgia to get Wallace on the ballot. In Patricia Sullivan’s assessment, the New Deal era—of which Wallace’s third party insurgency was a kind of culmination—was a period defined by an efflorescence of democratic values when “southerners had reached across racial boundaries to advance political and economic democracy in the region with the support of the federal government and a strong national labor movement.”⁷⁵ That said, Blackwell’s engagement with the Wallace campaign also suggests the ways in which local black political movements attempted to forge coalitions across both race and class boundaries in an attempt to advance their own particular interests. As Blackwell put it simply, he became involved in the campaign because he felt “Mr. Wallace held a more progressive attitude in regards to black participation in the election than did Mr. Truman.”⁷⁶ No minor character, Blackwell’s efforts were noted by senior Wallace aides. As Palmer Weber, Wallace’s Campaign Director for the South recalled, Blackwell headed a campaign at A&T that qualified over

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 273.

⁷⁶ Blackwell, “Patricia Sullivan Interview.”

three thousand black voters.⁷⁷ Following that success in Greensboro, Blackwell moved on to Macon, Georgia, where he was hosted by Larkin Marshall, a black newspaper publisher who would run for Georgia Senator that year.

Crucially, the campaign brought Blackwell face to face with the complexities of southern politics and race relations. As he told a Spelman College audience in 1966, his experience in Georgia that year had instilled in him a refusal to write off the potential of interracial organizing, particularly with working-class whites. Begging forgiveness for a personal anecdote, Blackwell recalled that:

Back in 1947 I came down to Georgia to work in a voter registration drive as a college student. And I found in the backwoods of Dawson, Georgia, a very broken-down, extremely rural white congregation that had over its pulpit—and you’ll get some picture of how poor the church was, because they had split a bed sheet, and they had made two signs – some about the “supremacy of God” and “brotherhood of mankind without regard to race.” And, I’m talking about an extremely rural part of Georgia in 1947.⁷⁸

Moreover, Blackwell’s recollections of the Wallace campaign also ties his political activism to a larger collective memory amongst African Americans that looked favourably on the administration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, in whose cabinet Henry Wallace had served. As Blackwell put it, “I still don’t believe that a President has had the kind of outpouring of affection and confidence that Franklin Roosevelt enjoyed in the [Black community] ... I remember very distinctly when Mr. Roosevelt died. I was a very young kid. The thousands of Black citizens that lined the railroad trail when his body was brought from Warm Springs back to Washington ... Mr. Roosevelt was second only [to] God where

⁷⁷ “Palmer Weber, 1914-1986,” *Southern Changes*, Vol. 8., No. 6 (1986), 7.

⁷⁸ Blackwell, A Debate between Mr. Stokely Carmichael [SNCC] and Mr. Randolph Blackwell [SCLC],” Spelman College, Atlanta (July 13, 1966).

poor people and Black people were concerned.”⁷⁹ Though the realities of an insurgent candidacy diminished “overt” support for Wallace within the black community, Blackwell continued to believe into the 1960s that there was still a “tremendous feeling of support for Mr. Wallace and the Progressive Party in the Black community. ... the kind of things that he was saying were the kind of things that the Black community would want to hear.”⁸⁰

But for the time being, Blackwell’s involvement in politics would have to take a back seat. Through the 1950s, Blackwell would embark on a career as an academic that, at least temporarily, drew him away from activism and grassroots political organizing. After graduating from North Carolina A&T in 1949 with a degree in Sociology, Randolph would go on to earn an L.L.B. from Howard University in 1953. Whilst at Howard, Blackwell would work on preparing the *Brown vs. Board of Education* case. As he recalled, the process involved the assistance of many non-legal intellectuals who attempted to make the case as air-tight as possible: “there were times when we drew heavily on sociologists, sometimes on historians and sometimes on economists; preparing every possible argument.” For Blackwell, the process involved a “give and take with everybody virtually bursting their minds to bring forth the best, as it was recognized then ... that this was not just another case, but what were probably doing was restructuring American society for some considerable time.”⁸¹ In addition to his time spent at Howard, Blackwell would enroll in post-graduate study in Economics at Syracuse University. Following this supplementary education, Blackwell was offered a position teaching Social Science at Winston-Salem Teachers College in North Carolina, where we would remain for under a year between

⁷⁹ Blackwell, “Patricia Sullivan Interview.”

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Blackwell, “Perspective,” 9.

September 1953 and June 1954. For the majority of the following decade, Blackwell would hold the position of Associate Professor of Economics at Alabama A&M College in Huntsville.⁸² Publishing frequently throughout the decade, Blackwell would also co-author a textbook, *Principles of Economics*, contributing to a chapter on the various forms of business organisation.⁸³

As the 1950s progressed, Randolph Blackwell must have watched evolving civil right movement from his office at Alabama Agricultural & Mechanical College in Normal with a healthy degree of interest. More than a simple bystander, however, there is sparse evidence to suggest that Blackwell emerged as a leader of a series of sit-ins in nearby Huntsville in 1962.⁸⁴ And following such tentative forays into the world of activism, Blackwell was offered a position at a new civil rights organisation: the Voter Education Project (VEP). On his resignation from his position at A&M, R.D. Morrison, President of the University wrote Blackwell that “in view of the advancement and opportunities your new position [at the VEP] will afford you and in view of my belief in your ability to make a worthwhile contribution in the service you are entering, I accept your resignation.” Continuing, Morrison informed Blackwell that “We wish to thank you for the hard work you have done here at the College during your seven and one-half years of tenure as a

⁸² “Biographical Sketch,” in *Records of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference Microfilm Edition*, Part 4: Reel 7, 0615.

⁸³ “Organization of Business: Proprietorship, Partnership, Corporation, and Cooperative,” in The Committee on Principles of Economics, *Principles of Economics* (New York: Pitman Publishing Corporation, 1959), 104-132.

⁸⁴ The evidence on Blackwell’s involvement is sparse, to say the least. For the two references I have been able to locate, see “Blackwell, Randolph T. (1927-1981),” King Papers Project at Stanford University, accessed September 15, http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_blackwell_randolph_t_1927_1981/; Groh, *The Black Migration*, 101

teacher ... we shall not forget to look for the good work we know you will accomplish after you leave.”⁸⁵

In large part, the VEP remains one of the more infrequently-studied civil rights organisations of the “classical” period of the struggle. Though still awaiting its first detailed history, the VEP has received substantial attention in Charles Payne’s seminal account of grassroots organizing in Mississippi, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*. As Payne details, the VEP’s origins could be found not in the freedom dreams of African American activists but in the more pragmatic considerations of a Kennedy administration unwilling to publicly antagonize recalcitrant southern politicians. Wanting to assist the efforts of civil rights workers in the South, yet determined not lose support for other policy initiatives, Kennedy and his aides established the VEP as an organisation dedicated to conducting “research” in some of the most hostile areas of the Deep South.⁸⁶

Formed in 1962, the VEP was charged with addressing the problem of spectacularly low levels of black voter registration through programmes that offered civil rights workers the incentive to move away from the direct action projects that so inflamed many white southerners. As Payne has observed, “They [the Kennedy Administration] expected voter registration work to generate a less violent response, a profound misreading of the situation.”⁸⁷ Perhaps more importantly, the establishment of the VEP allowed significant levels of foundation money to be directed towards efforts in the South, whilst maintaining a significant degree of federal oversight. And though many believed that the organisation

⁸⁵ R.D. Morrison to Blackwell, SCLC Papers, Part 4, 143:1.

⁸⁶ Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 108.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

amounted to nothing more than an attempted co-optation of the movement, federally-sponsored voter registration had been set in motion.⁸⁸

During his time with the organisation, Blackwell logged over 185,000 miles across the South, working to help African Americans become registered voters under some of the most hostile conditions imaginable. The experience of travelling through the South was often a haunting one. As Blackwell wrote of a journey through Mississippi, “one murder after another flashed in my mind, taking the place that the traditional road sights usually occupy. I had the experience of crossing over and looking into the river in which Emmett Till’s body was found.” For Blackwell, the experience was one only comparable to his time in the Armed Forces during the Second World War. As he put it, “For me, it was a matter of trying to watch behind me, and at the same time see what was taking place up front. This is no simple feat. This experience can only be matched by the time I was in Germany.”⁸⁹

In reality, registration drives were but a small part of Blackwell’s work during this time. In addition, VEP workers were charged with distributing food and clothes, setting up mass meetings, establishing citizenship schools and attempting “youth work” with local children. As Blackwell put it somewhat optimistically, such work would prove more than enough to counter the hostility of southern whites. As he wrote in a field report from Mississippi in March of 1963, “the project, as it presently exists, could go on successfully for an indefinite period of time ... despite the fact that none of the individuals involved have ever before been called upon to shoulder such as responsibility.”⁹⁰

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 108-09.

⁸⁹ Blackwell, Randolph. “A Mississippi Field Report,” *Southern Regional Conference Microfilm*, VI: 205.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

Though engaging for the most part in such day to day organizing, Blackwell's name has most frequently appeared in the historical record because of an incident he was involved in whilst working for the organisation in Mississippi. On the night of February 28th, 1963, in Leflore County, Blackwell was part of a three-man team of Voter Registration workers that were shot at by some local whites that had trailed them as they left the town of Greenwood. As the *New York Times* reported, "Bursts of gunfire rang out. Thirteen 45 calibre bullets stitched a ragged seam of finger-sized holes along the sedan's left side."⁹¹ Though Blackwell escaped unhurt, his colleague James Travis was hit, coming within an inch of serious injury when a bullet narrowly missed his spine. Indeed, violence was never far from Blackwell in this period; later that year, Blackwell was at Medgar Evers house the night before his assassination, playing with Evers' children.⁹²

Such incidents should not obscure the larger significance of the work undertaken by Blackwell and other members of the VEP, however. Learning the necessity of what he termed "concerted campaigning," Blackwell's experience of grass-roots organizing undoubtedly established the foundations of work he would pursue in the years ahead. Operating in some of the most dispossessed (and rural) counties in the South, Blackwell came face to face with both the dimensions of the southern racial order and the people most ensnared by it. As he moved forward, Blackwell would begin to formulate solutions to such glaring and deeply entrenched problems.

Though the evidence is at times fragmentary, the early life of Randolph Blackwell establishes some of the key themes and ideas that would animate the remainder of his

⁹¹ "Mississippi County is Turned into Major Battleground of Negroes' Civil Rights Fight," *New York Times*, 6 April 1963.

⁹² Jack Anderson, "Blackwell: A Good Man in the Wrong Job," *The Hour*, 27 January 1978.

career. Born to a proud working-class family, Blackwell's early experiences immersed him in a larger arena of engaged black politics that included the Garvey movement, the NAACP and Henry Wallace's Progressive Party. In addition, Blackwell's father's work on the railroads in Greensboro during the late 1920s would have undoubtedly made him aware of the efforts of A. Philip Randolph and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.⁹³ Growing to adulthood during the New Deal era, Blackwell's early life reinforced an identifiable sense of both race pride and class consciousness that shaped his career in African American public life well into the twentieth century.

Though the co-existing influence of Marcus Garvey, working-class politics, inter-racial organizing, student activism and the NAACP may seem somewhat counter-intuitive to students of African American politics, the notion would have seemed absurd to Blackwell. Rather than adhering to any one philosophical or programmatic line, Blackwell embraced a variety of strategies that offered progress and advancement for African Americans in the South. For Blackwell, the form his activism took, or its institutional home, was subservient to the larger goals focused on advancing a democratic black politics more attuned to the needs and aspirations of those most exposed to the legal, economic and social vicissitudes of segregated southern life. Soon enough, such efforts would be catapulted into the vanguard of the civil rights movement.

⁹³ On the significance of the Brotherhood and its relationship to African American activism, see Beth Tompkins Bates, *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America, 1925-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

2 *At the Heart of the Struggle: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1964 - 1966*

On the 13th of July, 1966, Spelman College hosted a debate between two central figures of the civil rights movement. Representing the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was Stokely Carmichael, a brash twenty-five-year-old, well known within the movement and fast becoming a national celebrity. In many ways, the summer '66 was Stokely's moment. Later that month, riots would erupt in the Hough neighbourhood of Cleveland.⁹⁴ "Black power" was in the air, and within four months Carmichael would place the slogan firmly at the centre of the nation's consciousness. Unsurprisingly, the issue was crucial to the Spelman debate. As Carmichael put it forthrightly, "Black Power is going to contradict American politics ... The solutions towards black people in the past has been integration ... when you talk about integration you talk about Morehouse students who graduate, you don't talk about a black person in Vine City who drinks wine. You don't talk about a cotton picker who makes \$2.00 a day ... black people will force these politicians to speak to the question of poverty."⁹⁵ An implicit critique of Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Carmichael envisioned black power as a decisive and necessary break from a civil rights movement unable—at least in his mind—to address the more pressing problems of inequality plaguing black communities across the nation.

⁹⁴ On the broader significance of the riots, and particularly, the Watts Uprising, see Gerald Horne, *The Fire Next Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995).

⁹⁵ Stokely Carmichael, "Debate with Stokely Carmichael," 6.

Sitting across from Carmichael on that day, Randolph Blackwell might well have had cause to wonder about the “revolutionary” nature of Stokely’s vision for a new direction in African American politics. He was on the back foot, however. Now serving in King’s organisation in the capacity of Program Director, Blackwell’s contribution to the debate was measured and careful. For much of the evening, the audience—which included academic and activist luminaries such as C. Eric Lincoln and Vincent Harding—seemed more intent on quizzing Carmichael on the future of the movement, and far less interested in the contributions of a man whose engagement with African American politics stretched back to the late 1920s. With the legislative successes of the previous two years beginning to fade, the Spelman College debate was viewed as being between the old and the new guard of the civil rights movement, an equation that pushed Blackwell’s opinions to the margins of consideration for many on that summer evening in Georgia.

But rather than accept the sharp dichotomies Carmichael was drawing between “black power” and “integration,” Blackwell seemed to be at pains to avoid confrontation with the younger activist. This was a time to build on past successes, not repudiate them, Blackwell argued. And although his comments suggest a faith in the existing movement’s integrity, Blackwell also seemed deeply aware of its increasing fragility. Drawing on his childhood and his father’s political experiences, Blackwell left the assembled audience with a note of distinct pessimism. As he put it, “Those of us who know the Garvey movement, know that Mr. Garvey was absolutely certain, back in the 1920s, that he was the proper person, and assumed a posture pretty similar to some of the postures that we hear now.”⁹⁶ Keenly aware of the tenuous hold African American activists held on both the national

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

consciousness and the black populace, Blackwell reminded the audience that “Of course, Mr. Garvey nor the UNIA is here today, despite the fact that it was an organization of some 10 million people. No organization today would claim that kind of record ... it is a mistake to assume that we are going to remain coalesced, all the way down to the end, and I don’t know how far the end is.”⁹⁷

For veterans of the struggle in the South, the sense of transition and uncertainty was increasingly felt in this new political moment. In a long article for *Commentary* published in early 1965, the long-time activist Bayard Rustin argued that the movement had to fundamentally re-imagine itself in order to affect larger transformations in American society. As he would argue famously in “From Protest to Politics,” activists had now to turn their attention to “qualitative transformation of fundamental institutions ... to the point where the social and economic structure which they comprised can no longer be said to be the same.”⁹⁸ In Rustin’s mind, he could not imagine “how the movement can be victorious in the absence of radical programs for full employment, abolition of slums, the reconstruction of our educational system, new definitions of work and leisure. Adding up the cost of such programs, we can only conclude that we are talking about a refashioning of our political economy.”⁹⁹ Fundamentally, Rustin believed that the way forward lay not in philosophical manifestos but in programmatic ventures designed to increase African Americans’ purchase on the political process itself. As Rustin argued, “We need allies. The future of the Negro struggle depends on whether the contradictions of this society can be

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ Bayard Rustin, “From Protest to Politics: The Future of the Civil Rights Movement,” *Commentary*, February 1965, 25-31.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

resolved by a coalition of progressive forces which becomes the *effective* political majority in the United States ... Negroes, trade unionists, liberals, and religious groups.”¹⁰⁰

But as SCLC’s Program Director knew, effective African American participation in such a coalition could not be taken for granted. As his recent experience had taught him, the SCLC was woefully underequipped—both structurally and organisationally—to be a central partner in any such revolution. Relying for too long on the salience of publicity, the force of mortality and short-term, direct action goals, Blackwell argued that SCLC had to more forcefully pursue the establishment of definable programmes and policies. As Blackwell put it, “We [SCLC] must acknowledge that in the past years our creativity and imagination were not employed in learning how to develop power. We found a method in nonviolent protest that worked and we employed it enthusiastically. We did not have leisure to probe for a deeper understanding of its laws and lines of development.”¹⁰¹ Going forward, Blackwell believed wholeheartedly that African American activism had to be undergirded by what he called a “mature realism.” As he put it, “When a new damn reveals a landscape dotted with obstacles the time has come for sober reflection, for assessment of our methods and for anticipating pitfalls. Stumbling and groping through the wilderness finally must be replaced by a planned, organized and orderly march.”¹⁰²

The alternative, as Blackwell saw it, would be the inevitable withering of an organisation he saw as uniquely equipped for a place in the vanguard of any emergent coalition for change. As the analogy he drew between SCLC and the UNIA suggests, much of what Blackwell worked toward with the Conference was animated by a sense that the

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Blackwell, “Power for the Powerless.”

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

organisation needed to be reformed to operate in a post-civil rights world. If it did not, Blackwell believed, the SCLC would squander its unique position and witness a waning of its legitimacy. This was the fate that Blackwell worked tirelessly to during his two years with the organisation. Over that time, Blackwell endeavoured—largely behind the scenes in Atlanta—to strengthen the foundations of King’s organisation and to transform it from a vehicle not simply of public protest but one capable of pursuing long term change for its constituents. Drawing on a number of historical touchstones—the Populists of the 1890s and the Popular Front of the 1930s, in particular—Blackwell saw his primary responsibility as ensuring that the Conference was at the heart of a new political order capable of advancing the interests of disadvantaged African Americans.

Blackwell’s journey to a position of relative prominence within the civil rights movement had begun roughly two years earlier. By 1964, Blackwell’s work with the Voter Education Project had gained the recognition of SCLC, who confirmed their reputation for cherry-picking activists. But as he explained years later, his decision to join SCLC was far from simple. In what was effectively a job interview with King, Blackwell recalled that:

I said to him I was committed to nonviolence, that I didn’t arrive at my commitment to non-violence theologically, that I arrived at it as a social scientist, but that I was firmly committed to non-violence. The next question he asked me was why did I want to work for SCLC? I said to him that I thought SNCC was philosophically sounder than SCLC, but that I had personally known the agony of having something to say and no platform from which to say it, and that he had the platform.¹⁰³

Despite this frank admission, Blackwell had clearly done enough to convince King of his potential value to the Conference. Testifying to King’s political openness and flexibility,

¹⁰³ Howell Raines, *My Soul is Rested: Movement Days in the Deep South Remembered* (New York: Putnam, 1977), 446.

Blackwell recalled that he had “reflected on it [the interview] many times because that was the kind of response that I think could have turned a lot of people off ... but it didn’t disturb him.”¹⁰⁴ And sure enough on the 6th of June, 1964 he received a formal offer. As a telegram sent to Blackwell’s home in west Atlanta informed him, “The Southern Christian Leadership Conference would like to extend to you an invitation to join our staff as Program Coordinator as soon as possible.” As King made it clear, “we are anxious to have you join us.”¹⁰⁵ Wasting no time in replying in his usual fastidious manner, Blackwell wrote to King that “Your invitation ... is received and accepted here with delight. You may expect me to report to work Monday, July 6, at 9 o’clock.”¹⁰⁶

By joining SCLC, Blackwell was entering an environment that contained a spectrum of political philosophies and positions. Though Blackwell saw himself as somewhat independent from a vast continuum beginning with the conservative minded Andrew Young and ending with the more radical Hosea Williams and the Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, he felt more inclined to side with the latter end of that particular spectrum. As Blackwell put it, “I would say I would be found sitting on the sideline borrowing from both.”¹⁰⁷ In recollections of his time with the group, Blackwell characterized SCLC’s internal structure as one where a kind of elastic, creative tension existed between warring personalities, yet one that somehow produced a form of productive reconciliation. As he explained, “Looking back on it, it [SCLC] was a very strange organization ... You had an

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ King to Blackwell, 6 June 1964, King Papers, general correspondence.

¹⁰⁶ Blackwell to King, 8 June 1964, King Papers, box 28, folder 21.

¹⁰⁷ Raines, *My Soul is Rested*, 448.

executive staff of fourteen highly egotistical, stubborn, arrogant people, who were strongly convicted, but willing to lay aside their strong convictions for *a* unity.”¹⁰⁸

In the twenty-four months following his appointment, Blackwell would serve in the position of Program Director, a role previously held by Andrew Young. In this capacity, Blackwell would be primarily responsible for overseeing the operation of SCLC’s nine departments “into a nonviolent coordinated attack designed to bring down the ignoble walls of incomprehension, misunderstanding and hatred which exists between individuals, ethnic, and racial groups.”¹⁰⁹ As this rather amorphous remit might suggest, the SCLC was yet to fully establish its organisational credentials. As Adam Fairclough has noted, the SCLC was, for the most part, “a study in confusion.”¹¹⁰ Yet Blackwell did assume a set of defined, identifiable responsibilities. For the most part, the Program Director was responsible for overseeing the work of the other departments, and making sure enough work and research had been undertaken to ensure their effective operation, should they be put into action.¹¹¹ But at the most basic level, Blackwell was to serve as a coordinator, organizer and manager from the central office in Atlanta.

Even from his earliest days at SCLC, Blackwell was heavily involved in some of the organisation’s most important, and public efforts. On the 27th of March 1965, around 30,000 people left the Brown Chapel AME Church in Selma, Alabama, beginning a long march to the statehouse in Montgomery that would take a week to complete. As the *New Yorker* reported, “They were a varied lot: local Negroes, Northern clergymen, members of labor unions ... mothers pushing baby carriages, members of civil-rights groups, isolated,

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 447.

¹⁰⁹ Blackwell, “Office of the Program Director,” SCLC Papers, 144:25.

¹¹⁰ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 2.

¹¹¹ Blackwell, “Office of the Program Director.”

shaggy marchers with an air of simple vagrancy, doctors, lawyers ... and a preponderance of what one marcher described as ordinary, garden-variety civilians from just about anywhere.”¹¹² One of three marches that took place over a month-long period, the journeys across the Alabama Black Belt were, in pragmatic terms, a huge success. Often referred to as the political and emotional crest of the civil rights movement, the marches were rubber-stamped by the passage of the Voting Rights Act, which reached Congress only ten days after the first event.

In one respect, the marches could be read as Randolph Blackwell’s signal achievement during his time with SCLC. As he recalled years later, it was an event and operation whose success he was instrumental to. “I had the stay-at-home job,” Blackwell noted. “I kept the store. I was not in the field in the sense that the other staff persons were. To a very great extent my job was handling the mobilization, handling the resources for the march, and handling the media from the Atlanta end.”¹¹³ For Blackwell, at least part of the marches’ success was due to his insistence that their scale be as large as possible. In fact, his desire for a grand event brought him into direct conflict with other members of SCLC’s executive committee who felt that the organisation was incapable of effectively handling such a large number of people. As Blackwell put it, “I felt that this was an historical moment. It was very personal with me. I didn’t discuss it with anybody ... I felt that *this* was the moment when it had to be. And that every force that could be rallied should be rallied at this point.”¹¹⁴

¹¹² “Letter from Selma,” *New Yorker*, 27 March 1965.

¹¹³ Raines, *My Soul is Rested*, 448.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 449.

Despite the historical importance and visibility of events orchestrated by Blackwell in early 1965, his contribution to the civil rights struggle in Alabama might be looked at very differently, however. No sooner had the successes of March passed before Blackwell had returned to Selma—this time in the field, a much less common assignment for him—to assess the aftermath of SCLC’s direct action activism. Visiting with the leadership of the Selma Emergency Relief Fund, a group who lent financial support to those suffering economic reprisals for their involvement in civil rights activity, Blackwell discovered that his organisation had failed to leave any real plan of action for the residents of Dallas County. Such men and women were caught in the crossfire of southern racism and an operational culture that, as even Andrew Young admitted, was less than concerned with longevity. “Even in terms of layin’ a strong organizational base for SCLC, Martin [Luther King] really wasn’t interested in building an organization to last,” Young recalled.¹¹⁵ It was an old complaint, of course. As a frustrated Ella Baker had argued years earlier, SCLC often prioritized the event over the follow-up, a pattern she pointed out that often left black communities largely defenceless following high profile campaigns.¹¹⁶ And though Baker’s portrayal perhaps drew too stark a distinction between the “leadership” model of activism preferred by the SCLC and her own “grassroots” version, the disjunction was one that Blackwell increasingly sought to address.

Following a frank discussion with local leaders in Selma, Blackwell recounted in a long report the numerous problems facing activists in the Alabama black belt. Most pressingly, local leaders were struggling to handle the repercussions of SCLC orchestrated direct action activism that had unsurprisingly inflamed local whites. Though such problems

¹¹⁵ Raines, 427.

¹¹⁶ Ransby, 170-83.

were a common concern amongst communities throughout the South during the civil rights era, Blackwell observed that things were being exacerbated by significant communication barriers that existed between the SCLC and local efforts. Put simply, the SCLC and its local affiliates were not cognizant of each other's position or their immediate needs. In addition, Blackwell identified a growing level of mistrust with the way the Conference was handling funds earmarked for Dallas County. All in all, Blackwell observed how the combination of SCLC carelessness and local difficulties had created a climate where programmes were simply not effecting any meaningful change. More than that, such limited efforts were only piecemeal solutions to larger issues that needed to be systematically addressed. Despite the positive benefits to local relief work, Blackwell argued, such programmes were being carried out with "little or no understanding of poverty in the broader sense."¹¹⁷

Attempting to diffuse what was at times a difficult exchange of opinions, Blackwell was at pains to point out that "it is not the policy or practice of S.C.L.C to walk off and forget communities in which it develops movements." But if Blackwell's report was anything to go by, local leaders were not fully convinced. As the conversation turned toward finding solutions, Blackwell was adamant that relief was only a short term means to address more entrenched issues of poverty. Though the SCLC had "an obligation to do whatever we can about the extremely [sic] hardship cases," Blackwell suggested that black communities in Dallas County might be better served by developing "a program for self-help employment rather than immediate relief." To this end, Blackwell proposed a number of "long-range" programmes that would stand as the earliest iterations of a broader programmatic philosophy of African American empowerment that would define his post-

¹¹⁷ Blackwell, "A Report on a Visit to Selma, Alabama, Along with Proposed Programs," 10 May 1965, KP, general correspondence.

SCLC career. As he put it, such programmes were “far more worthy of consideration by S.C.L.C. both in terms of what they can mean to the community and what they can mean to the future history of S.C.L.C.”¹¹⁸

Blackwell proposed community development in Dallas County on two fronts. First and foremost, Blackwell argued that African American communities needed reliable, paid employment. To address this problem, he suggested that the establishment of a silk-screen factory might be beneficial to local residents, who would need minimal training before being able to start work. For Blackwell, “the important thing to keep in mind is the fact that we are putting people to work for themselves.” Moreover, Blackwell suggested that the SCLC should assist in establishing a home for unwed mothers. As Blackwell argued, “In the South, a great price is exacted in the form of social ostracization of young women that become mothers out of wedlock.” With pregnancies at an early age often denying women access to education, Blackwell noted that “any possible contribution that she might have made to society is also lost.”¹¹⁹ In addition, Blackwell argued that such centres could be used to offer formal training for women for jobs such as practical nursing and reception work. Admitting that such proposals were at a nascent and ill-defined stage, Blackwell closed his report by allowing that he had “greatly simplified these proposals because of the

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Here again, Blackwell appears to be addressing Ella Baker’s critique of the “masculinist” nature of civil rights leadership. As Barbara Ransby argues, “The attitudes that King and other ministerial leaders of the SCLC held toward Baker were not unique ... rather, they were a manifestation of the larger problem of sexism within the church, the organization, and the culture.” See Ransby, 184. Though Blackwell was rarely explicit about the realities of working-class African American womanhood, this does suggest that SCLC was not simply a bastion of misogyny, but was in fact capable of addressing issues of immediate importance to women.

period of time that I have had to get them on paper. I will be delighted to go into detail if they appear to have merit.”¹²⁰

Here then was a social scientist pushing an embryonic economic programme on an organisation of ministers, a pattern that would continue throughout Blackwell’s tenure with SCLC. As yet, no historian has examined Blackwell’s influence on the events and strategy at the heart of the civil rights movement. As Andrew Young recalled, “Blackwell entered that staff about ‘63, too, and it used to be Randolph Blackwell, Dorothy Cotton, and [James] Bevel and myself meeting out at Blackwell’s house late at night tryin’ to figure out what we oughta do and scheme up on Martin to try to get him to lead it.”¹²¹ Moreover, the relationship between Blackwell and the “radicalization” of Martin Luther King has yet to be acknowledged. As numerous historians have argued, events in the 1960s were fundamental in radicalizing King and pushing the minister toward a class-centric analysis of American inequality. More recently, Thomas Jackson has countered by asserting that an engagement with class critiques of American society was nothing new to King in the 1960s. As Jackson argued, “King’s vision of economic freedom was rooted in his intellectual development and early experiences in the southern black freedom movement.”¹²² Though Jackson may very well be correct, his argument paradoxically de-historicizes the emergence of a “radical” King in the late 1960s. Moreover, neither thesis sits comfortably with correspondence between Blackwell and the leader of SCLC. In particular, archival evidence suggests that Blackwell had to go to some length to persuade King of the efficacy of introducing an economic analysis—in both theoretical and programmatic terms—to the

¹²⁰ Blackwell, “A Report on a Visit to Selma.”

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 427.

¹²² Jackson, *From Civil Rights To Human Rights*, 2.

work of SCLC. What both Jackson and Garrow might have missed in their search for the origins of King's transformation was the influence of one of his closest advisors, a man who in his two years in SCLC was important in drawing out the latent political tendencies of his employer.

In a memo to King early in 1966, Blackwell had informed King that there “are many individuals who saw in the March to Montgomery not the culmination of a great push for human rights but in fact the beginning of one.”¹²³ To that end, Blackwell was persistent in his attempts to establish a department of Labor and Economic Affairs within SCLC. As Blackwell argued, “Since the economic question is at points the basic issue confronting the Negro and the poor generally, a department dealing specifically with these matters is of towering importance.”¹²⁴ For Blackwell, “the role of the Department of Labor and Economic Affairs is threefold: to build active relationships with the labor movement, particularly those unions with large Negro memberships; to expand and coordinate the work of Operation Breadbasket; to serve as a channel for developing federal programs in as many communities as possible.”¹²⁵

Given his growing position of influence within SCLC, Blackwell soon got his way. Formally headed by C.T. Vivian, but with sizeable input from Blackwell, the new Department of Economic Affairs was charged with the responsibility of exploring the “educational, social, economic and vocational deprivation of the Negro community.”¹²⁶ More substantially, the Department began to use Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) funds to pursue community development projects in a number of southern counties.

¹²³ Blackwell to King, 27 January 1966, KP, general correspondence.

¹²⁴ Blackwell, “Power for the Powerless.”

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ “Report—Dialogue Department,” SCLC 4, 145:25.

Established as a means of “restructuring community and breaking the cycle of poverty and prejudice,” such projects were—in Blackwell’s mind—the first forays into a larger progressive challenge to the cycle of poverty and racism plaguing the region. As he put it in a letter to King, “The wheels are in motion for a possible complete renaissance in the South. Such a renaissance will require very careful planning.”¹²⁷

Crucially, Blackwell was instrumental in forging closer ties between SCLC and an emerging anti-poverty community. Foreshadowing his exit from King’s organisation, Blackwell met with the Citizen’s Crusade Against Poverty (CCAP) in January of 1966. In a long letter to King, Blackwell noted that the experience had been revelatory: “In the discussions I heard individuals suggest, with great excitement, programs that I had been studying, reading about and working over in my own mind for the past 15 years,” Blackwell noted. However, the discussions had also “brought into clear focus for me the nature of my discontent with the way that we have spent money as we sought to discharge our organizational responsibility.” For Blackwell, SCLC had a duty to transform direct action into long-term, meaningful change, and to assume a central role in the fight against poverty. As he put it, “I was especially stricken by the fact that S.C.L.C. has the best staff in the nation for doing the job that has to be done in the area of Social Change.” As CCAP executives attempted to formulate ways to increase the participation of the poor, Blackwell “smiled ... because I knew that out involvement with people, unquestionably, qualifies us to do this kind of work.” With conviction, Blackwell informed King that he was “convinced

¹²⁷ Blackwell to King, 27 January 1966, KP, general correspondence.

that the war on poverty cannot successfully be waged without the involvement of S.C.L.C.”¹²⁸

Most notably, Blackwell helped the Anti-Poverty Coordinating Committee in Wilcox County, Alabama to apply for an OEO Grant. By helping residents who had been evicted from their farms and land to establish a co-operative farming enterprise, federal anti-poverty money could be used to recast such black-belt communities as new “socio-politico-economic unit[s].”¹²⁹ With new economic foundations providing potential footholds for entry into local politics, Blackwell believed that such prosaic interventions in the political economy of the rural South held much promise. “Like the white constituency,” Blackwell argued, African Americans “recognize that come the elections this May, there could be touched off not only substantial changes in the political structure of Wilcox County, but more fundamental rearrangements in its economy, educational system, social organization ... [and] its demography of human potential.”¹³⁰ As Blackwell put it, “Intensive federal aid, determined community action, and Divine Guidance can conspire to bring this beautiful county the material productivity ... human fellowship and fulfilling life that her lovely hills and verdant acres inspire.”¹³¹ As a promotional brochure for the cooperative put it optimistically, a “rebirth” in the Alabama black belt was afoot.”¹³²

The Department of Economics was not the only new creation of Blackwell’s, however. In addition, the Program Director pushed King to establish what became known as the Dialogue Department. As Blackwell argued, increasing mechanization—particularly

¹²⁸ Blackwell to King, 27 January 1966, KP, general correspondence.

¹²⁹ Jackson, 265. This venture would in time become the Southwest Alabama Farmers Co-operative. For a detailed account of this organization, see Ashmore, *Carry it On*, 198-252.

¹³⁰ “New Structures Versus Old Problems—A Plea,” SCLC Microfilm, Part 4, 7:0534.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² Anti-Poverty Program Evaluation, Box 5, RG 381, Community Services Administration Papers.

in the South—was reducing the amount of jobs available to working people across the region. Moreover, Blackwell argued that widespread job loss could hold dangerous implications for the future of race relations. As he wrote in a memo to King, “The thought of a world without labor will excite the emotions and imaginations of the most reasonable of men. But for those of us in the Civil Rights struggle there is another significance ... It must be felt that ... this country and particularly the South is moving into one of the most dangerous periods in all history.”¹³³ Predicting an era of disintegrating race relations, Blackwell argued that increasing white unemployment would have an unsurprising outcome: “These white individuals will not blame themselves. Neither will they blame our political and economic system. Many of them will possibly conclude or will be told that they are unemployed because their jobs have been given to a Negro.”¹³⁴

To avoid this turn of events, Blackwell proposed facilitating communication between black and white communities within the South by building on instances of existing student activism and by searching out new areas of “positive cooperation” with working class whites. To this end, SCLC began exploring ways to facilitate such inter-racial activity. At the first Colloquium on Dialogue, activists were encouraged to dwell on the importance of the South to both whites and blacks. As notes taken at the meeting show, volunteers were encouraged to “Cut through fears by starting with that which is common or neutral ... Have group[s] start with a look at themselves as Southerners and tell South’s contributions to American life.”¹³⁵ To this end, workers were shown passages by both James McBride

¹³³ Blackwell to King, “A New Department in SCLC.”

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ “Notes from the First Colloquium on Dialogue,” SCLC, 145:26.

Dabbs and Ralph Ellison on the beauty of the South, ruminations they hoped would dramatise the shared heritage of working-class southerners.¹³⁶

Clearly, Blackwell refused to exclude working-class whites from participation in any endeavour to revolutionize the South. This refusal was at least in part intellectual. As he noted, certain contributions to the field of social science—Oliver Cox’s *Race, Class and Caste*, V.O. Key’s *Southern Politics*, and John Dollard’s *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*—had skilfully repudiated the common-held assumption that racism was confined to the poorest segments of white communities.¹³⁷ But with such studies aging quickly by the mid-1960s, Blackwell suggested that new research could be done “into the question of just where is prejudice is most intense and just how intense it is.” Moreover, such studies could “involve many white students both north and south who have expressed a desire to do something for the movement other than direct action.”¹³⁸

This was more than a simple translation of intellectual convictions into action, however. Indeed, one of the most consistent themes throughout Blackwell’s career is a fundamental emphasis on the need to engage the masses in the fight against inequality. At an SCLC staff conference in 1964, Blackwell had argued that the critical question would be the source of power SCLC chose to draw upon in order to affect meaningful change. Forthrightly, Blackwell argued that “we [SCLC] must orient our program around PEOPLE.” Rather than relying on the support—financial or otherwise—of prominent

¹³⁶ The quotations the dialogue department encouraged volunteers to use came from Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (1953; New York: Vintage, 1995); James McBride Dabbs, *The Southern Heritage*, 1st ed. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1958).

¹³⁷ Blackwell to King, “A New Department in SCLC.” The influence of these texts was clearly crucial in Blackwell’s intellectual development. In particular, the work of the Marxist Oliver Cox suggests that class—though rarely articulated in an explicit manner—was never far the forefront of Blackwell’s mind.

¹³⁸ “Notes from the First Colloquium on Dialogue,” SCLC, 145:26.

individuals, SCLC had to remain engaged with the issues animating the masses.¹³⁹ Consistently, Blackwell articulated an expansive definition of southern political praxis that drew no lines of race, class or occupation. Such a programmatic philosophy was rooted—at least in part—in some of Blackwell’s most important political touchstones. In particular, Blackwell’s faith in the veracity of inter-racial organizing had roots in his own experiences as an organizer for Wallace’s Presidential campaign in Georgia during the late 1940s, where he had witnessed instances of white and black cooperation in some of the supposedly most “hostile” areas of the state. In Blackwell’s mind, southerners were capable of transcending a colour line that often kept the working class divided. Though tentative, Blackwell gestures in the mid-1960s were toward creating an avowedly populist politics of inclusion, one protean enough to include both white and black southerners in a broad-based struggle to transform the region.

But in Blackwell’s opinion, SCLC had often failed to discharge its responsibilities toward such larger goals. In particular, Blackwell was a vociferous critic of the SCOPE programme which he argued carried only the pretence of a democratic movement for social justice. In a memorandum to both King and Reverend Abernathy, Blackwell argued that “it is still not too late to build a truly grass roots movement in the United States.”¹⁴⁰ But SCOPE had, in Blackwell’s opinion, “degenerated in the main to an experiment in liquor and sex, compounded by criminal conduct, no less than a series of reported rapes.”¹⁴¹ In a series of internal memorandums dispatched over the course of 1965, Blackwell attempted to ascertain how the project was functioning, and to bring it into line with established

¹³⁹ Blackwell, Minutes from SCLC Executive Staff Retreat, SCLC Microfilm, Part 4, Reel 6: 0422.

¹⁴⁰ Blackwell to King and Reverend Abernathy, 25 August 1965, SCLC 4, 143:21.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

SCLC policy and practice. Most pressingly, Blackwell struggled to maintain even basic information about where projects were being undertaken, who was being worked with, and what commitments to SCLC could be expected from those now affiliated with the group.¹⁴²

More than a theoretical or political abstraction, Blackwell's interest in the potential of a revived populist politics in the South emerged from a dialogue between his activism on the ground and his own reading of both southern and American history. Indeed, during his debate with Stokely Carmichael in 1966, Blackwell dwelt at length on the agrarian uprisings of the late nineteenth century. As he argued unequivocally at Spelman College, the movement needed to "usher in another Populist period." For Blackwell, the Populists remained a vital political inspiration because of the ways in which they addressed "the needs of the people." In Blackwell's mind, their importance lay not in whether "they were black or white, but because of their ability to define the economic issues of that day, and raise them to a level where there was support for them."¹⁴³ Though the remark generated a less than fruitful debate over the racist credentials of the Populist leader Tom Watson, Blackwell's point was that the consistently racialised content of southern politics prevented important political issues from being raised, and properly addressed. Relating the insurgency of the 1890s to contemporary concerns about the civil rights movement and its ability to transform itself into a viable political force, Blackwell argued that

One of the major things that has come out of Alabama and the Negro political upsurge of 1966 is the fact that political issues are being raised now. Wallace's rallying cry was "Stand up for Wallace" – rather, "Stand up for Alabama." Well, that's not a political issue ... I think if we ever get what *he* means by "Stand up for Alabama" out so can people can see what he's talking about and take a position on issues, that might be on the threshold of a new day even for Alabama. But, thus far, and up to this point, we've only been dealing with "Stand up for Alabama" kind of

¹⁴² Blackwell to King, 19 May 1965, KP, general correspondence.

¹⁴³ Blackwell, "Debate with Stokely Carmichael," 7.

issue. The political issues in the South all over, all over the South, have been “moving the government along.” That’s the political issue. “Honesty in government.” Nobody has said anything about hospitals schools, roads, this kind of thing ... I’m willing to run the risk of hearing the people back home speak, particularly if we can raise the economic issues.¹⁴⁴

Identifying a commitment to material concerns beyond the warp and wood of a polarized political culture in the South, Blackwell’s “populist turn” suggests a distinct evolution in his vision of African American politics.

Blackwell’s commitment to such a broad-based politics also emerged from another source. Drawing on the New Deal era for inspiration, Blackwell argued in his debate with Carmichael that “it would be a real tragedy to forget that when the AF of L spangled off into several different directions and out of it came the CIO, one of the fundamental propositions on which that organization was founded was the fact that poor people, regardless of race or colour, have basically the same needs and motivations and that they can be organized to push forward those needs and motivations.”¹⁴⁵ In Blackwell’s mind, relationships of cooperation—a coalition, in sum—had to be rebuilt between the civil rights movement and organized labour.¹⁴⁶ To that end, the Economic Department of SCLC had begun to train civil rights workers in establishing working relationships with labour unions such as the AFL-CIO. This was a particularly pressing problem in the South where union activity was on far more fragile ground, and Blackwell knew that “many of the civil rights workers in the South have little knowledge of the labor movement, and yet many of them

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ For an overview of the relationship between organized labour and various forms of emergent radicalism during the 1960s see Peter B. Levy, *The New Left and Labor in 1960s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

realize that organization is one of the most meaningful ways to help lift economic standards in the South.”¹⁴⁷

To understand Blackwell’s interest in the potential demonstrated by both the Populists and an inclusive labour movement, one has to grasp Blackwell’s explicit interest in increasing African American purchase on the political process in ways that extended far beyond the ballot box. An ever more pressing concern as his time with SCLC drew to a close, Blackwell argued that all the important questions facing African Americans revolved around issues of *power*. The crucial task, Blackwell believed, was to transform activist energy into political leverage that could then be converted into economic power. As Blackwell would put it, “The greatest challenge confronting SCLC, therefore, is to discover those levers of power that Negroes must grasp in order to influence the course of events.”¹⁴⁸ Continuing to develop this theme in a paper authored in 1966 entitled “Power for the Powerless,” Blackwell argued that “people struggling from the depths of society have not been equipped with knowledge of the science of social change. Only when they break out of the fog of self-denigration can they begin to discover the forms of action that influence events ... [and] generate the kind of power that shapes basic decisions.”¹⁴⁹

Was such focus on issues of power—and African American power, at that—an implicit endorsement of all that Stokely Carmichael embodied? Was such theorizing of African American politics a sign that Blackwell could be counted amongst the adherents of what by 1966 was known as “black power”? Perhaps. As the Spelman debate indicates, Blackwell—as a representative of the “old guard” of civil rights activists—became

¹⁴⁷ Report on the Dialogue Department, SCLC 4, 145:26.

¹⁴⁸ Blackwell, “Power for the Powerless.”

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

increasingly embroiled in debates over the efficacy and meaning of black power politics, and its impact on the existing civil rights movement. But in obvious ways on that night in Atlanta, Blackwell displayed a muted impatience with the much younger Carmichael, who he clearly viewed as a newcomer with only a brief track record of work in the hostile climate of the South. In a number of ways, Blackwell clearly viewed Stokely's contributions as a less than substantive, ill-articulated amalgam of sloganeering, provocation and un-focused anger.

But perhaps more than that, Blackwell's discomfort with Carmichael appeared to stem from the ways in which the rhetorical whirlwind surrounding black power served to obscure the continuing goals of a civil rights movement that he clearly envisioned more broadly than as a simple counterpoint to "black power." In Blackwell's mind, black power was being "journalistically abused." As he was quick to point out, the SCLC had never had any difficulty with the proposition that Negro people have a right to self determination."¹⁵⁰ And employing history as a means to buttress his argument, Blackwell noted that "black power" had deep and relevant antecedents. As he argued, "this is the kind of thing that Frederick Douglass was talking about; it is not substantially different from what Dr. Du Bois talked about for some fifty years; it is not substantially different from what Edgar Brown of a different school and period talked about or the National Negro Youth Conference of different period talked about."¹⁵¹ It was not simply that black power was antithetical to the goals of the civil rights movement, Blackwell argued, but rather that its

¹⁵⁰ Blackwell, "Debate with Stokely Carmichael."

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.* The reference to Edgar Brown, an obscure reference point, is intriguing. As far as I am able to tell, Brown was the "Racial Advisor" to the Civilian Conservation Corps, a New Deal program that put over 250,000 young African Americans to work between 1933 and 1941. For Brown's assessment of the program, see Edgar Brown, *The CCC and Colored Youth* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Offices, 1941).

concerns had to be clarified. As Blackwell put it, “I think it does need to be talked about, and, certainly, when it is raised, it invites one to be specific in what he is talking about. And one of the tragedies of it is that that invitation has not gone forth enough to clear the air of precisely what we are saying when we say “black power.”¹⁵²

Far from a rejection of black power on the basis of a reductive party line, Blackwell’s assessment of the movement—particular when combined with his contemporary understanding of how African American politics could, and should evolve—suggests his resistance would evaporate, if only people would agree to focus on substantive solutions to the concerns most black activists shared. As ever, Blackwell attempted to navigate an increasingly ideological and polarized climate by attempting to bring the debate back to what he considered far more pressing realities. For Blackwell, the important point was that a dichotomous debate between “integration” and “separation” was incapable of attending to the emergent challenges of a rapidly transforming society.¹⁵³ In Blackwell’s mind, the civil rights/black power movement had to understand its relevance to larger issues of political economy and macro-level transformations in the structure of the American labour force. As he argued wholeheartedly, such issues could not be effectively approached simply from a position of racially-exclusive politics. As Blackwell put it;

It seems to me that the unfortunate thing about black power as it is presently being used is that it tends to suggest that this is the sole concern of Negro people in civil rights movements. It might very well be that this is the sole concern of certain organizations and this does not trouble me. It happens that the Southern Christian

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ Blackwell’s increasing attention to shifts in technology is documented by the presence of a report in Blackwell’s papers on the Second Annual Conference on the “Cybercultural Revolution,” a gathering of scholars and professionals that SCLC aide Ann Kindberg attended in May of 1965 in New York City. As Kindberg’s report details, “Cybernation, when viewed ‘not as a culprit, but as the liberator,’ offers opportunities and solutions to any problems that otherwise might be insoluble. It requires only that we make ourselves aware of the possibilities—both dangers and freedoms—and prepare ourselves to deal with them creatively.” SCLC 4, 144:32.

Leadership Conference believes that the twentieth century civilization is infinitely more complicated than just the race problem, and because of that, we have to be concerned with advancing technology; we have to be concerned with a number of social forces that we feel are compelling decisions that cannot be answered purely by viewing our concern as just one of the position of the Negro people.

Quoting Cicero in “Power for the Powerless,” Blackwell argued that “Freedom is participation in power.” But separatism, Blackwell pointed out, “Is not the answer to the Negroes’ problem. The answer will be found in a mutuality of power.” Clinging to the belief that “people are capable, both Negro and white, of seeing the issues and speaking to them,” Blackwell continued to argue against the notion that “only out of a Negro political bloc that there can emerge a kind of political purity.”¹⁵⁴

Underpinning such ideas was another pressing concern: Blackwell’s fear of an impending schism in the ranks of the struggle. In many respects, Blackwell’s performance in the Spelman debate was shaped by his desire to paper over the widening cracks between different generations of activists. In Blackwell’s mind, African American activism could only be an effective political force if it stayed unified, and was comfortable with diversity within its ranks. For Blackwell, the question of which organisation or group of people were seen to be “leading” the fight against justice was largely immaterial. As he put it to the Spelman College audience:

I’m not sure that the split between the organizations isn’t an exaggerated split. Certainly there are differences in the organizations at various levels, and I would hope that there would always be. ... I conceive of the civil rights movement as a coalition, accepting the proposition that within a coalition various organizations will get off at various times. I like to think of the civil rights movement as a struggle of the Negro people in terms of a rail track. Where perhaps we leave the first station with all of the parties aboard; and perhaps one leader or person or organization will

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

carry it to the first station and this is as far he is prepared to go and he will step down and turn the cab over to another organization that has an objective that goes beyond that. And perhaps at some point he will step down and turn it over to another organization. It might very well be that within the family of the organizations, some of them are approaching the point where ... some of the organizations are contending that they are the rightful engineer for this particular episode, and I suppose that it will be a matter for history to decide whether or not it is, in fact, the right engineer for this particular next stretch.¹⁵⁵

Despite his valiant defence of older traditions and practices that the SCLC to a certain extent embodied, Blackwell's time with the organisation was drawing to a close. By mid-1966, his position within the group, he believed, was untenable. In a long letter to King, Blackwell listed twenty separate issues that he argued were hampering SCLC.¹⁵⁶ But at the heart of the problem, Blackwell admitted, was a conflict with SCLC member Hosea Williams that went "to the very bottom of the philosophy of the organization." Repudiating the suggestion that the conflict was one of clashing personalities (not an unreasonable assumption within SCLC), Blackwell believed that "It [the conflict] raises in a very serious way the question of whether we can at this point develop the internal structural discipline needed and whether we as a body can examine and seek out program economies."¹⁵⁷

All was not lost, however. Amongst a number of complaints concerning SCLC financial policy, staff morale, field staff morality and the lack of preparation African American candidates were being afforded for taking public office, Blackwell identified one particular concern that signposted his future direction in a post-civil rights world. As Blackwell reported, efforts in Crawfordsville, Georgia were being made "to aid the people ... out of a state of economic deprivation inflicted upon them as a result of positions that

¹⁵⁵ Blackwell, "Debate with Stokely Carmichael."

¹⁵⁶ Blackwell to King, "A General Overview of S.C.L.C.," 14 February 1966, KP, general correspondence.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

we participated in encouraging them to assume.”¹⁵⁸ In that small community, and other similar places across the South, Blackwell would continue work he had begun—however tentatively—with SCLC.

As King’s letter to the departing Blackwell makes clear, his was a presence that would be sorely missed. And at a time of transition amidst the movement, Blackwell was not the only member of SCLC to depart. James Bevel left to organize a large anti-Vietnam War demonstration in New York City, and C.T. Vivian departed to conduct community work in Chicago. Now without some of his most trusted lieutenants, King would leave for Jamaica pondering the escalating conflict in south-east Asia.¹⁵⁹ But he would return, as would Blackwell, reinvigorated and ready once again to challenge the indignities of American life.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul*, 330-31.

3

*Southern Rural Action and the Economics of Place in the Post-Civil Rights
South, 1966-1977*

On October the 16th 1967, Randolph Blackwell delivered a speech at the University of North Carolina. On that particular day, Blackwell was not in Chapel Hill to trumpet the successes of a civil rights movement in which he had played a crucial role. Rather, Blackwell's speech was far more sober in tone, a long, concerned analysis that attempted to confront the question Martin Luther King had famously posed that very same year: "Where do we go from here?"¹⁶⁰ As King and Blackwell both understood, the landmark legislation of both the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act had done little to alleviate the endemic poverty that remained amongst black communities, both North and South. Employing a refrain he would repeat in numerous public appearances over the next decade, Blackwell began by informing his assembled audience that "There is a problem in our nation evident like the bold print of doom written on the wall of the famous Babylonian King's palace."¹⁶¹ Re-assuming his identity and training as a social scientist, Blackwell told listeners that "The size of the problem, the races of people being hurt, the calendar of their increasing misery, and the timetable of their increasing despair have all been measured. A glimpse of the resulting consequences has been made clear in our major cities. These data are all available; and yet, bold, innovative planning is woefully limited or non-existent."¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010).

¹⁶¹ Blackwell, "Out-Migration and Civil Disorder."

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

As the speech at UNC makes clear, Blackwell's understanding of the movement had acquired new dimensions. Now separated from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Blackwell's attention had moved away from civil disobedience toward problems of demography, economics and industry. Moreover, his focus had centred itself on the black rural South, a geographical, political and economic space that, in Blackwell's mind, deserved particular attention in the fight against inequality. As Blackwell told his audience, "I write today of those families of our southern region who are being driven from their land, homes and communities by the machines and forces of modern times and simply asked to 'go away—anyplace—get lost.'" ¹⁶³

Marshalling both statistical and historical evidence, Blackwell located the source of both the accelerating urban crisis and persistent southern poverty in the rapid flight of black southerners from the region. As Blackwell saw it, the crux of African American poverty nationwide was "in the fact that human labor is being displaced from agriculture at the rate of 10 per cent per year." ¹⁶⁴ But instead of abandoning the people and communities of the rural South, and accepting the reality of regional exodus as a *fait accompli*, Blackwell proposed a very different option: the incorporation of such abandoned men and women into the economic prosperity enjoyed by other parts of the nation. Moving into prophecy, Blackwell announced that he could foresee "a fascinating era of new development for the Southeast region, with ample opportunities for the useful employment of all our young people and those who are now under-employed." ¹⁶⁵ Only by re-energizing agriculture through the incorporation of small, poor and disenfranchised farmers, Blackwell believed,

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

would the region begin to move away from poverty and hardship. Nothing if not optimistic, Blackwell closed by looking confidently towards a far better for future for the South: “Ours has been a land of beauty and pathos. I look forward, in my own lifetime, to it becoming one of beauty and prosperity, and a home where [people] can find a future for ... [their] children.”¹⁶⁶

The speech given that day on campus—entitled “Out-Migration and Civil Disorder”—remains a remarkable gateway into the efforts of Randolph Blackwell following his resignation from the SCLC in 1966. On that fall day in Chapel Hill, Blackwell would lay out what he termed “A New Destiny for the South,” a vision of social justice for the region that combined a trenchant critique of the political, economic and policy underpinnings of black rural poverty, as well as tentative gestures towards a way out of the mire.¹⁶⁷ A tenacious and persistent critic of the federal government, Blackwell laid the blame for the South’s economic stagnation at the door of the Department of Agriculture, whose historic policies, he argued, had heavily favoured the cause of agribusiness at the expense of the vast majority of southerners. All was not lost, however. For Blackwell, effective economic and political guidance could “assist the southern region—or any region of the United States—in offering families opportunities within communities where they have skills and desires for work and residence.”¹⁶⁸ And although advocating policy reform at the national level, Blackwell’s arguments were undergirded by a conviction that an effective rehabilitation of the region had to involve the participation of

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

those most often marginalized from such discussions. As Blackwell put it, so often “People ... seem to have been left out.”¹⁶⁹

What Blackwell offered were not merely academic solutions, however. Rather, he had already begun to establish the social foundations of this idiosyncratic project. Following his exit from SCLC, Blackwell had founded Southern Rural Action (SRA), a private, non-profit organisation dedicated to addressing the challenges of economic development and community building in some of the most impoverished parts of the region. Between 1966 and 1977, SRA would slowly expand its efforts across the South. Beginning in Crawfordsville, Georgia, and extending to over one hundred communities throughout the region, the efforts and successes of SRA’s work would eventually earn Blackwell a position in the Department of Commerce as the head of the Office of Minority Business Enterprise (OMBE) during the administration of Jimmy Carter.

Although “Southern Rural” received substantial contemporary attention—including extensive articles in both the *New York Times* and *Ebony*—it has been almost completely ignored by historians. Glaringly, one recent work on the War on Poverty in Alabama dedicated an entire chapter to the Southwest Alabama Farmers Co-operative (SWAFC), while failing to properly explore significant aspects of the organisation’s fiscal and intellectual origins: Blackwell and SRA.¹⁷⁰ This general scholarly elision does have some relatively simple explanations, however. In large part, histories of the post-civil rights South dealing with African American politics have been limited.¹⁷¹ Moreover, black power scholarship has often retained the urban and northern predilections of its most famous, and

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁷⁰ Ashmore, *Carry It On*, 198-252.

¹⁷¹ One important exception to this general proposition is Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta*, illustrated edition. (London: Verso Books, 1998).

visible historical proponents.¹⁷² Only recently have such histories begun to focus their analytical lens southward.¹⁷³

In another regard, the story of SRA fits uneasily into accounts of the War on Poverty, a field dominated by scholars of policy history and larger political narratives. And though the field that has come to stress how federal legislation operated and was implemented at the local level, such narratives have struggled to effectively incorporate the distinct roles and political visions of African American activists and intellectuals. Rather, such figures have often been subsumed by the policy making process itself, an intellectual space where federal employees remain the crucial historical actors. One important exception to this rule is the work of Thomas Sugrue, whose recent account *Sweet Land of Liberty* centred the role of community activists within a larger narrative of the “northern civil rights movement.”¹⁷⁴ At least in part, the story of SRA should help erode some of the segregation between African American history and the field of policy and political history, demonstrating that black activists could effectively engage the state, even at the height of the black power era.

If anything, the ability to fully locate and incorporate the narrative of Blackwell and SRA is complicated by the reliance of existing scholarship on easy (and often unhelpful) binaries between “civil rights” and “black power.” As Timothy Tyson demonstrated in his work on Robert F. Williams, the two movements, “often portrayed in very different terms,

¹⁷² Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). William Van Deburg, *A New Day in Babylon: Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-75*, New edition. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

¹⁷³ Devin Fergus, *Liberalism, Black Power, and the Making of American Politics, 1965-1980* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009).

¹⁷⁴ Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2009).

grew out of the same soil, confronted the same predicaments, and reflected the same quest for African American freedom.”¹⁷⁵ And though Tyson’s argument suggests the shared roots of the two “movements,” it also serves to reify both as the sole landscape of African American politics in the years after 1965. Moreover, Tyson’s argument about “black power” relies far too heavily on a “radicalism” whose index of self-defence and firearms leaves us none the wiser as to the complexities and variations of we may or may not be able to call “black power” itself.

In many respects, the language and historical categories historians have thus-far employed seem woefully inadequate for describing someone like Randolph Blackwell. The post-1965 period has often been assumed to be—perhaps with good cause—the black power era. But can we rightly begin to characterize the “civil rights” veteran Blackwell as a proponent of Black Power? After all, Blackwell did name a housing development in Plains, Georgia, the “Africana Village.” Moreover, Blackwell consistently invoked the necessity of black self-determination, linking the idea to both economics and the process of community building. However, Blackwell was also comfortable with aligning his work with the legacy of Booker T. Washington, a name that would have been considered anathema to many at the heart of the “black power” movement. Moreover, how are we to incorporate the evidence that Blackwell enjoyed support from Republican politicians, often in the deepest parts of the South? At least in part, the challenge may be to avoid any such reliance on a framework that simplifies the diversity of black politics and activism in the post-civil rights era.

¹⁷⁵ Timothy B. Tyson, “Robert F. Williams, “Black Power,” and the Roots of the African American Freedom Struggle,” *The Journal of American History* 85, no. 2 (September 1998), 541.

At a basic level, Blackwell believed that the problems of African American poverty in the twentieth century were not irreducible to simplified issues of race. Clearly rejecting the fiercely ideological and rhetorical climate of the late 1960s, Blackwell put his faith in solutions rooted in a focus on political economy. Moreover, Blackwell was intimately concerned with larger macro-economic shifts in the national economy that no amount of debate or protest would alter. Often, Blackwell would allude to the forces of “modernity” and modern technology that were quickly transforming the very ground on which black activists attempted to work. In this sense, SRA can be seen as an organisation geared not simply to redressing historical injustice but also one interested in equipping African Americans for an economic future that would look substantially different from the contemporary employment landscape in the South.

Importantly, Blackwell’s activism in the rural South demonstrated that he refused to accept an easy conflation between African Americans, rural life and agriculture. Despite the heavy emphasis he assigned to black farming in “Out-Migration and Civil Disorder” and his work with the Southwest Alabama Farmers Cooperative, the vast majority of projects SRA initiated were non-agricultural in nature. Operating in the midst of a prevailing political culture during the mid-to-late 1960s that included endeavours such as the “Back to the Farm” movement and “Back to Appalachia,” Blackwell was careful not to simply advocate a return to African Americans’ historical and occupational roots. Rather, Blackwell’s focus on establishing light industry in the rural South was rooted in a desire to divert capital away from the economic sinkhole of the urban North, whilst providing new skills for black workers that would prove far more helpful in an increasingly service-centred economy.

In addition, Blackwell's work with SRA should magnify his place as a leading dissident and critic of the ascendant minority business model of the time: Black Capitalism. A Richard Nixon initiative of federally-sponsored minority enterprise at least partially designed to attract African Americans to the Republican Party, the programme enjoyed widespread support in the late 1960s. As Blackwell recalled in 1974, "Those few individuals who cried out against this approach [Black Capitalism] were like babes in the wood in the rising tide of shining new enterprises popping up everywhere."¹⁷⁶ As Blackwell argued, the programme only circulated small amounts of existing capital within the African American community, encouraging the establishment of small businesses that catered only to local black customers. As he told the *Atlanta Voice* in 1974, "It was evident from the beginning ... that the black community would not be the major beneficiary of Black Capitalism as it was being projected."¹⁷⁷

Above all, Blackwell was dedicated to an economic activism focused on the importance of *place*, a man whose programmatic goals were guided by a belief that the centre of the struggle for African American dignity lay way down South in Dixie. To a great extent, an attention to the overwhelming potential of the South animated everything that Blackwell did. A space he understood as being far from a site of reactionary escape from the rigors of industrial life, Blackwell's South was a region of concrete economic and political struggles that could potentially create new ideological, racial and material possibilities for African American life in the "rural." In this sense, the work of SRA vividly demonstrates the relationship between increasingly impersonal economic arrangements and the production of increasingly *local* politics. As one advocate of the "New Southern

¹⁷⁶ "Proposal to US Department of Labor," SSP, box 21.

¹⁷⁷ "Southern Rural Action," *Atlanta Voice*, 16 March 1974, 6.

Studies” has recently observed, “globalization is dialectically producing, on the ground in the South, place-based forms of social activism and resistance struggles in defence of place ... *Place* in these diverse struggles becomes a symbol of all that is worth fighting for: continuity of human connection and mutual commitment, environmental stewardship, the integrity of moral rather than material priorities.”¹⁷⁸ At its heart, Blackwell’s work with SRA articulated a version of modernity and development that was rooted in a black and rural South that could be situated at the centre of larger project of economic emancipation.

To talk of a southern re-birth in these terms may seem contradictory to standard narratives of the South during the second half of the twentieth century. In large part, such histories have focused on the erosion of southern agriculture and its replacement by the “sun-belt,” an area of economic affluence tied to defence and hi-tech industries stretching from the east coast of Virginia through Atlanta to the West Coast.¹⁷⁹ More recently, southern politics has been reduced to the rise of the New Right and the “Silent Majority” in the southern suburbs of cities such as Charlotte and Atlanta.¹⁸⁰ With the “old” replaced by a “new,” presumably more just South, the status of African Americans within the region’s more recent history has become increasingly ill-defined.

Does such an elision of black people from recent southern history simply represent a minor historiographical quibble over the appropriate subject matter? At least for Thomas

¹⁷⁸ Barbara Ellen Smith, “Place and Past in the Global South,” *American Literature*, (Vol. 78, No. 4, December 2006), 693.

¹⁷⁹ Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*.

¹⁸⁰ Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton University Press, 2007); Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton University Press, 2007).

C. Holt, “Visibility and invisibility are functions of ideology.”¹⁸¹ Developing this basic point, the literary critic Thadious M. Davis has argued that the absence of a black South is distinctly problematic for our understanding of the region. Identifying a “regionality of the black self,” Davis writes that:

Though the historical presence of blacks in the actual or imagined South has forwarded more than one idea of the region, that presence is perhaps more than problematical today when there is an ongoing attempt to link the region to concepts more in keeping with the slick media image of the “Sunbelt.” Downplaying the presence of blacks may be a way of simultaneously asserting changed conditions in the region and denying one significant catalyst for those changes.¹⁸²

Challenging a range of assumptions about African Americans’ undoubtedly conflicted relationship to the South, Davis identifies the possibility of a distinctly southern and black identity emerging from the historic crucible of racial terror and exploitation.

There is no reason that such insights cannot be extended to the study of historical subjects. As Davis’ intervention should make clear, significant counterpoints to the ascendant meta-narrative of (white) southern progress remain to be uncovered. The employment of historical methodologies in this endeavour has thus far been limited, however.¹⁸³ In particular, attention to the formation of regionally specific African American political subjectivities (such as that of Randolph Blackwell) in *response* to the economic shifts so frequently highlighted in the standard historical accounts has been woefully lacking. As the story of Southern Rural Action confirms, the economic revolution that

¹⁸¹ Thomas C. Holt, “Gender in the Service of Bourgeois Ideology,” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 41 (Spring 1992): 29-36.

¹⁸² Thadious M. Davis, “Expanding the Limits: The Intersection of Race and Region,” *The Southern Literary Journal* 20, no. 2 (Spring 1988): 3.

¹⁸³ One notable exception to this can be found in the work of James Cobb. In particular, see Cobb’s essay “Blackness and Southernness: African Americans Look South Toward Home,” in James C. Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2007), 261-287.

allowed certain communities to re-define the South as a place of prosperity (freed from its historical legacy of racism and labour exploitation) also provoked local resistances to the very idea of such a normative—and white—South being consecrated. If the history of SRA suggests anything, it is that such narratives have to be expanded to include efforts in the name of a new *black* South, one envisioned in the name of both material health but also in deep social and historical attachments to the places, communities and geography of the region that African Americans continued to inhabit.

Late in 1966, Randolph Blackwell finally left the SCLC, confirming a decision that had been building for quite some time. He was not out of work for long, however. Shortly thereafter, Blackwell joined a new organisation: the Citizen's Crusade Against Poverty (CCAP). Chaired by United Auto Workers (UAW) President Walter Reuther, the CCAP was a broad coalition of over 125 groups and community leaders involved in a wide-ranging fight against economic disadvantage. As a *New York Times* article noted, "the organization proposes to give vitality to a provision in the Economic Opportunity Act that defines a community action program as one 'which is developed, conducted and administered with the maximum feasible participation of residents of the areas and members of the groups served.'"¹⁸⁴ More succinctly, the *Washington Post* recalled that the CCAP "was devised as a private agency to help keep the public war on poverty honest."¹⁸⁵ As Reuther himself put it, CCAP was concerned primarily with resources, designed to

¹⁸⁴ "Civic Heads Unite to Fight Poverty," *New York Times*, 7 November 1965.

¹⁸⁵ "New Towns and Old, Black Communities," *Washington Post*, 14 June 1974.

“provide the bridge between those people who have the resources and those who need them in finding economic solutions to their economic problems.”¹⁸⁶

Initially, Blackwell was appointed to the board of directors in the capacity of Program Director. Despite assuming this ill-defined role, it quickly became clear that Blackwell’s particular concerns lay on his home turf in the South, and with African Americans whose immediate economic realities the civil rights movement had only falteringly begun to assist. On the 31st of August 1966, CCAP announced the formation of the Southern Rural Action Project, with Blackwell at its head.¹⁸⁷ The establishment of SRA may not have been a simple task, however. As Fay Bennett, executive secretary of the CCAP wrote to Blackwell, “At first when the SRAP was proposed, I tended to feel negatively toward it and said so at a meeting of the CCAP’s Executive Committee. I feared that this would be a paternalistic kind of project with northern affluent committees adding their bit for the poor in the rural South.”¹⁸⁸ Despite this evidence of internal misgivings, Blackwell had his start, and wasted no time in establishing SRA’s first headquarters, a tiny two-room office in Atlanta.

Tucked away in the eastern piedmont of Georgia, around ninety miles from Atlanta, Taliaferro County would seem an arbitrary place for SRA’s entry into the struggle against rural hardship. But in many respects, Taliaferro (pronounced “Tolliver”) was emblematic of the places, and problems that SRA would attempt to address over the next decade. As Blackwell himself might have said, the suffering population were easily identifiable.

¹⁸⁶ “Southern Rural Action Project: Progress Report No. 1” in National Sharecroppers Fund Collection, Part 1, box 24, folder 11.

¹⁸⁷ “A Private Program To Organize Poor In South is Planned,” *New York Times*, 1 September 1966; “Atlantan to Head New Poverty Unit,” *Atlanta Journal*, 11 August 1966.

¹⁸⁸ “Fay Bennett to Randolph Blackwell,” 30 September 1966, NSCF, 1, 24:12.

Taliaferro was an overwhelmingly black county, with African Americans numbering upwards of sixty percent of the population.¹⁸⁹ Establishing a durable model of operation, SRA would explicitly focus on the poorest of the poor, with its activities located primarily in some of the most economically deprived areas in the South. In this respect, Taliaferro met the criteria perfectly, a county where the median income for a family of four was only around \$35 per week.¹⁹⁰ Education levels were also desperately low, with the average Taliaferro adult holding less than a grade school education, and with roughly a quarter having had less than 4 years, sub-standard teaching.

Taliaferro had problems far deeper than simple stagnation and underdevelopment, however. One of the smallest counties in Georgia, Taliaferro could in 1960 count a population of only 3,370. But perhaps most worryingly, that small number represented a 25.4% decrease from the county's 1950 level. Such areas had been diminishing in population for years, with Taliaferro by the 1960s losing an average of 200 people per year. As one local woman, Emma Harris, put it, "As soon as they come of age—18—they're going away from here ... There's nothing to keep them here. My man can't give them what they need on the few dollars he makes at the sawmill."¹⁹¹ This was a common story across the region, with counties such as Taliaferro located at the sharp end of a larger macro-economic process: the erosion of small farming in the South.¹⁹² The problems facing such places were acute, but perhaps not insurmountable. As Blackwell put it, "If we are going to reverse the downward trend of these counties, it will take the efforts of everybody. And

¹⁸⁹ "Census of the Population 1960: Georgia, Characteristics of the Population," *US Census Bureau* (Volume 1, Part 12), 34.

¹⁹⁰ "The Crawfordville Story: Will Community Foundations and Community Investment Trusts Supply a New Answer to Rural Poverty?" in NSFC, 1:24, 10.

¹⁹¹ "The Great Migration: A Crisis for Both the City and Rural America," *New York Daily News* in NSCF, 1:24, 10.

¹⁹² Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*.

most of the places we have been going into in fact have been going downhill for the past 100 years.”¹⁹³

These demographic realities were the crux of Blackwell’s work. As ever, he approached the problem from the studious, careful standpoint of a trained social scientist. As he pointed out in 1967, the number of African American farmers in the South had dropped precipitously from 883,000 in 1930 to only 184,000 in 1964, a 79% decrease. As he put it, “the ... facts, to me, have a stark eloquence.”¹⁹⁴ This loss of land and work, Blackwell argued, was the source of an accelerating out-migration of rural African Americans to urban centres. As Blackwell put it vividly, “they eventually arrive, of course, in the festering centre of some large city—economically and educationally naked. Homesick. Culturally crippled. Ready to rake leaves where there are no trees; attend yards where there are no yards.”¹⁹⁵

For Blackwell, this process was not the neutral result of “modernization,” “progress” or the natural course of a free market. Rather, this regional displacement was directly attributable to the policies of the federal government, a “forced” migration which gave black southerners little say in their own destiny.¹⁹⁶ As Blackwell saw it, federal policy was firmly in the corner of large-scale agribusiness. Though rural America was being supported and subsidized by tax-payers’ money, Blackwell was at pains to point out “that the American public has paid out to the wrong farmers.”¹⁹⁷ Rather than displaying an interest in the livelihoods of rural southerners, Blackwell argued, agricultural policy was

¹⁹³ “Rural Action Helps to Give Poor Southern Blacks Jobs and Pride,” *New York Times*, 8 May 1972.

¹⁹⁴ Blackwell, “Out-Migration and Civil Disorder,” 11.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁶ For a reiteration of this point in the scholarly literature, see Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco and Rice Cultures since 1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986).

¹⁹⁷ Blackwell, “Out-Migration and Civil Disorder,” 3.

guided by the theory that that “the public is interested in its food supply; that it desires orderly rather than chaotic conditions in its agricultural economy; and that it wishes to conserve its natural resources.”¹⁹⁸

In particular, Blackwell pointed to numerous federal policies, including the Agricultural Adjustment Administration Act of 1938, the Agricultural Marketing Act of 1937, and the Farmers Home Administration Act of 1961, that had solidified the status of large farmers within the rural political economy. Through substantial federal subsidies, agri-business had been able to proceed with significant capital investment—most often used toward mechanization—that accelerated the displacement of small and tenant farmers. Moreover, racial discrimination within the Department of Agriculture guaranteed that African Americans—let alone rural, southern blacks—would continue to be marginalized from policy discussions. As Blackwell noted, “Not a single Negro person has yet been permitted to serve as a County Committeeman on a USDA Agricultural Conservation and Stabilization Committee—the body which determines which farmers shall receive gifts of public money.” In the state of Georgia alone, Blackwell recounted, USDA discrimination had comprised a multitude of sins, including denying African Americans access to technical assistance and financing, the widespread absence of black staff workers and the persistent promotion of under-qualified white employees over existing, more experienced black administrators. Even the *Georgia Cloverleaf*, the publication of the Georgia 4-H Club—a youth development organization funded by the United States Department of

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

Agriculture—rarely printed articles describing the successes of African American farming.¹⁹⁹

But as Blackwell argued, the stakes were greater even than the decimation of rural America. Rather, such policies focused on agricultural production were contributing to the accelerating urban crisis in the North. As he put it, “We are faced ... with the fact that the United States, without the formality of choice, and as a tidal fact, is denuding its open spaces of people, and crowding them together with an apparent result that both the cities and rural society are deteriorating.”²⁰⁰ There was hope, however. For Blackwell, the more visible problems of urban life could be at least in part solved by a regeneration of the rural. In reality, Blackwell believed, issues of poverty both North and South were fundamentally linked. As Blackwell noted, “I do not understand Secretary of Agriculture [Orville] Freeman that he is reducing their food costs. This means to me that he is destroying rural communities and people, increasing city slums, raising city taxes, and opening the gate for a monopoly takeover of rural America.”²⁰¹

With the rural to urban migration showing no signs of slowing, Blackwell saw the problems of inner city life only worsening; “If we spend billions on the cities, and if we ignore the rural scene, then the bigger the program the more it must be self defeating. It can only draw more and more people into the slums. The cities can’t stand that pressure ... the people can’t stand it either.”²⁰² The key was to reverse the equation. As Blackwell further argued, “People go where houses are built and jobs are available ... If we have rural

¹⁹⁹For Blackwell’s full catalogue of discrimination within the Georgia division of the USDA, see “Out-Migration and Civil Disorder,” 12-15.

²⁰⁰*Ibid.*, 3.

²⁰¹*Ibid.*, 10.

²⁰²“Black Land Loss: 60,000,000 Acres and Fading Fast,” *Southern Exposure* 2 (1974), 110.

development we can save the cities in the process.”²⁰³ As their first newsletter put it, “We of the Southern Rural Action Project are convinced that what we need in this country is a lot, of small, socially, culturally, and economically vibrant communities. Please, no more New York or Chicago.”²⁰⁴

Though Blackwell knew that African American farmers, and historically held black land were at the heart of the issue, he was quick to point out that the erosion of small-scale agriculture engulfed the entire labour market of local communities, including wage labourers who relied on such farms for employment. Moreover, Blackwell knew that it was not only African Americans who would experience the erosion of their livelihoods in the rural South. As he frequently noted, “Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, Indians, persons from the West Indies, and other colored people have a similar situation—sometimes even more difficult since they do not speak English fluently and their exploitation is made easier because of the language handicap.”²⁰⁵ If anything, this admission suggests that Blackwell was attentive to the changing realities of agricultural labour, and its increasing shift toward migrant labour and workers that were increasingly global in origin.²⁰⁶

This, in brief, was the grand theory guiding SRA in its early years. There were different, often more pragmatic considerations as well, including African American

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁴ “Southern Rural Action Project: Progress Report No. 1.”

²⁰⁵ “Speech at the University of North Carolina,” 10; Though there is not widespread evidence to suggest that Blackwell was a persistent defender of minority rights outside of the African American community, there is some. See in particular, “Blackwell Defiende a Hispanos Y a Otros Minoritarios,” *El Mundo* [Puerto Rico], 29 May 1978.

²⁰⁶ On migrant labor in the twentieth century South, see Cindy Hahamovitch, *The Fruits of Their Labor: Atlantic Coast Farmworkers and the Making of Migrant Poverty, 1870-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

political advancement in a post-Voting Rights Act era.²⁰⁷ Though Blackwell's new project may have seemed an abrupt break with his previous protest-based work, SRA's attempts to alleviate rural poverty through economic activism had its roots in earlier, tentative efforts by the SCLC. In fact, the enterprise in Taliaferro County had its roots in a traditional concern of the civil rights movement: school desegregation. In 1965, Crawfordville—the county seat of Taliaferro—had been engulfed by contention, with both black protests and white reprisals following the opening of a high school to African American children. Following the exodus of white children, numerous local black leaders involved in protests were fired from their jobs, including future SRA project director, Calvin Turner. SRA thus entered a community in which, as Turner knew, school desegregation was but the crescendo of many racially-rooted grievances, including all-white policy boards and county officials that neglected to institute food stamp plans and anti-poverty measures. As Turner put it, “these issues were at stake long before the school question.”²⁰⁸ In an attempt to offer some redress, SCLC had founded the silk-screen operation, which had limped along until Blackwell and SRA arrived to rejuvenate it.²⁰⁹

SRA's answer to the problem was simple: establish an economic base that would allow African Americans both to improve their material realities and to go about gaining an important foothold in local politics. Beginning in Taliaferro County, SRA attempted to do just that. With modest start-up capital, totalling \$10,200—one half from the National Council of Negro Women and one half from the private Stern family fund—SRA set out in the small town of Crawfordville to construct a textile and silkscreen enterprise. Entering a

²⁰⁷ For an effective analysis of the challenges confronting the entry of African Americans into local politics in the post-civil rights South, see Lawrence J. Hanks, *The Struggle for Black Political Empowerment in Three Georgia Counties* (University of Tennessee Press, 1990).

²⁰⁸ Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 204-205.

²⁰⁹ “Unskilled Men Find Magic in Dedication,” *Atlanta Journal*, in NSCF 1, 24:11.

rural community where most women only had experience as field hands or domestics, SRA spent the first eight weeks training a total of eighteen women in industrial sewing, screen printing and plant supervision. In response to increasing orders and workloads, this modest initial workforce was soon expanded to forty-two.²¹⁰ The change would be hard to overstate; all of the first twenty-five workers had previously been unemployed, and with the establishment of the enterprise the business became the largest single employer in the entire county.²¹¹ And soon, Crawfordville Enterprises would be strengthened by a grant of \$212,700 from the Office of Economic Opportunity.²¹² Even the site of the building used for the silkscreen production was rooted in the history of the black South. As Blackwell recalled, “Back about fifty years ago when the Negroes had no school they went back into the woods and built one for themselves out of hand-hewn logs.”²¹³

But at its heart, SRA embodied far more than an economic solution to the problems of rural poverty. For Blackwell, the project of rural re-generation could not rely simply on the establishment of a textile factory but had to be infused by the theory and ethos of “total community development.” In Blackwell’s mind, it was not enough simply to establish a new economic base and source of work; more far-reaching changes in the environment, infrastructure and ultimately the identity of such communities had to be effected. As the organisation’s first newsletter stated simply, the goal of SRA was to “eliminate the causes

²¹⁰ Though hard to fully flesh out, it appears as if a significant part of SRA’s work was in improving the lot of rural *women*, in particular. Many of the factories established by SRA employed large numbers of women, and significant amounts of attention were given to facilities that assisted working mothers, such as day-care centres. SRA’s activism—as far as I can tell—was never couched in the language of male dignity, but in a framework of community which, despite its somewhat patriarchal overtones, was a defence of black rural families that allowed women a substantial role in sustaining through their economic independence. Given the complicated role of women within the black power movement more generally, this is especially worth noting.

²¹¹ “It Works: III. In Rural Georgia a Small Co-Op Booms ... and Destroys a Myth,” in NSCF 1, 24:13

²¹² Richard W. Boone to Executive Committee of CCAP National Board, NSFC (August 25, 1967)

²¹³ George W. Groh, *The Black Migration: The Journey to Urban America* (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1972), 107-108.

of poverty, and, in the process, bring new dignity to the lives of the poor.”²¹⁴ To that end, SRA also helped to establish a credit union, affordable housing initiatives, a co-operative store, farm programmes, a health-care clinic, day care centres, film clubs, basic education classes for adults, sewing clubs, and communal study halls for local children.

As an SRA progress report from the first four months of operation suggests, Blackwell’s goals for the organisation and its work were expansive:

1. Total community development (a program for everybody) is the best way to effect change in the economic level of the poor.
2. Poor people have resources in their possession that can be employed to change their economic condition.
3. There are available resources in the private sector that can be added to those from the public sector to carry on an anti-poverty campaign.
4. It is still not too late to think in terms of revitalizing the Southern agricultural industry.
5. Economic uplift has a direct positive influence on the nature of Southern politics.²¹⁵

For Blackwell, a truly *communal* regeneration could not be measured simply in terms of material gains but rather in the ways in which projects challenged the more intractable problems associated with long-standing poverty. SRA knew it had to re-establish a sense of dignity and attachment to the project of re-habilitating places few outside of the local area cared to think about anymore. Moreover, the residents of the areas SRA touched had to be

²¹⁴ “Southern Rural Action Project: Progress Report No. 1,” NSCF 1, 24: 13.

²¹⁵ “Progress Report.” With reference to point number 5, Blackwell appears to have retained his faith in the potential role of white workers in the struggle for economic justice, and a more substantive political discourse in the South. At a conference in Vermont in 1967, Blackwell was insistent on the role organized labor had to play in encouraging whites to disavow racism. As he put it, “The Negroes have their Carmichaels, Kings and NAACCP; the poor whites have nothing. Organized labor is about the only institution which could give them that leadership.” See “Blackwell Sees Negro-White Coalition Ending South’s Racism,” *Burlington Free Press*, 24 March 1967, in NSCF 1, 24:11.

at the administrative, economic and moral heart of the project. As Blackwell put it, “You’re not really developing the rural South unless you can get people to say *this is my community*. You can put up 50,000 houses and if they don’t feel like it’s theirs, they’ll be torn up.”²¹⁶ For the project to succeed, profits could not be appropriated elsewhere, but had to be funnelled back into the development of visible and material evidence of local, impoverished people’s involvement.²¹⁷ As Blackwell put it, “You’re not helping people when you’re benefitting from their labors.”²¹⁸

SRA sought to teach those men and women who had for years known nothing but disadvantage that they were capable of remedying their own situation, with a little assistance. As Blackwell put it, empowerment had to be accompanied by meaningful investment if it was to be sustained, long term: “We have found that it is a simple matter to cause people to accept the fact that they have valuable resources within their possession that can be employed to raise their standard of living. The idea of combining these resources with resources from outside the community has really gone over big. We talk with people about the possibilities of total community development—a program for everybody. This gives rise to all sorts of constructive projects.”²¹⁹ Moreover, Blackwell challenged both the givers and receivers of philanthropic handouts to approach the problem differently. As Blackwell argued, “We’re not being helped by you building us a house unless we participate in the profits that come from building it ... Otherwise, you’re

²¹⁶ Blackwell, “Black Land Loss,” 111.

²¹⁷ In the late 1960s, there was a larger legislative background; in 1968, around 35 senators and a similar number of Representatives introduced a bill to congress called the Community Self-Determination Act. SRA was cited as a primary example of the benefits of full community involvement in local economic development.

²¹⁸ Blackwell, “Southern Blacks Help Themselves,” *Ebony*, 87.

²¹⁹ Southern Rural Action Project Progress Report No. 1,” NSCF 1, 24:13.

exploiting our poverty.”²²⁰ Rather, Blackwell wanted “our people to turn away from the traditional welfare concept ... we want them to demand real opportunity. And we are saying to government, to business, to foundations, to anyone who cares: ‘There is a community of decent, hard-working people who are starving to death. If you will assist us, we can make that community fruitful.’ ”²²¹ As Blackwell soon showed, he was prepared to go to the very top to defend the interests of such communities. In early 1967, the White House of Lyndon Baines Johnson received an angry telegram from Atlanta. It read:

Events in the state of Mississippi continue to be a source embarrassment for our nation and a source of discouragement for the citizens of good will of that state. More than a year ago a[n] OEO labor department program was announced to train 1,000 persons [in] Clarksdale[,] Mississippi ... no one person has been trained in line with this promise ... these kinds of delays speak to the real reason why Negro people are flowing into the cities with a feeling of bitterness and unrest.²²²

For a President attempting to deal with an escalating war in Vietnam, there were probably other, more pressing priorities.

Though initially on precarious financial ground, the silkscreen factory in Taliaferro County—soon to be named Crawfordville Enterprises—was buttressed by a \$900,000 loan from the Office of Economic Opportunity. Over time, efforts were assisted by further funding supplied both by other private sources, and a Farmers Home Administration grant of \$123,000. By 1975, 9 years after the project’s founding, the factory was producing around 43,000 fake fur coats a year, and perhaps more importantly, the women at the factory were earning up to \$3.50 an hour, a substantial improvement from the weekly wage

²²⁰ “Southern Blacks Help Themselves,” 85.

²²¹ Groh, *The Black Migration*, 105.

²²² Randolph Blackwell to the White House, *Lyndon Baines Johnson Papers*, General: Labor 2, Box 12, 1 March 1967.

of \$3 some took home before SRA had arrived.²²³ Later, SRA helped establish a secondary operation in Crawfordville, a woodworking plant for local men.



2. *Women producing fur coats in Crawfordville Georgia*

But why did Blackwell choose to pursue light industry as the means to black economic advancement? After all, Blackwell's speech at UNC in 1967 had centred on a vision of re-imagined rural production, yet one that still emphasized the utility of African American agriculture. As Blackwell had then put it, "I foresee that millions of acres of Appalachian and Southern lands will be converted over into productive grasslands, and that other acreage will be utilized for production of forage and grain to feed livestock ... I foresee a place for all small farmers and poor farmers in the essential occupations of producing and processing these food products."²²⁴ Moreover, Blackwell was not alone in attempting to centre the rural and agricultural South in the African American political

²²³ "Southern Blacks Help Themselves," *Ebony*, 82.

²²⁴ Blackwell, "Out-Migration and Civil Disorder."

imagination during the late 1960s and early 1970s. In ways that have yet to be fully explored, the issue of land and farming continued to remain a touchstone within African American political culture long into the twentieth century. In 1970, Julian Bond and Fannie Lou Hamer—organizer of the “Freedom Farm” in rural Mississippi²²⁵—placed a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* drawing attention to the issue of accelerating black land loss. The advertisement, entitled “Must all blacks flee the South?” had another important influence: the economist James S. Browne, author of the Black Economic Development Conference’s “Black Manifesto,” a document that famously demanded two hundred million dollars in reparation payments for the historic injustices of slavery.²²⁶

But what distinguished Blackwell from his contemporaries was his refusal to accept that rural life was necessarily co-extensive with agricultural production. At least in part, Blackwell seems to have been deeply aware of the potential for criticism within the African American community about the ultimate goals of such a project. In particular, Blackwell was clearly concerned with refuting the idea that SRA was a reactionary, anti-modern project intent on keeping poor black people “in their place.” As Blackwell noted, “We’re not trying to keep them on the farm, but we are trying to show them that they have an alternative to fleeing the cities where most of them find life to be even worse. Many of the people who left the rural South for the cities didn’t really want to go. So our small factories

²²⁵ For a description of this period of Hamer’s career, see Lee, *For Freedom’s Sake*, 136-162.

²²⁶ “Must all blacks flee the South?” *New York Times*, 26 April 1970; Browne would go on to co-author the most comprehensive contemporary account of African American land loss. See Robert S. Browne, *Only Six Million Acres: The Decline of Black Owned Land in the Rural South* (New York: Black Economic Research Center, 1973)

are designed to make it possible for them to stay and earn a decent living right where they are.”²²⁷

But more than that, Blackwell’s insistence on the potential of black farming to underwrite the food supply of a nation undergoing drastic population expansion emerged from a broader economic theory about the necessity of pulling white capital into black communities. African Americans, Blackwell argued, could make no progress (or profit) by selling products to their own, already disadvantaged communities. An explicit critique of Richard Nixon’s Black Capitalism initiative, SRA’s development model attempted to integrate African American businesses into the larger American (and white) flow of capital, drawing resources to where they were needed most. The “SRA Hypothesis” was based on establishing “manufacturing enterprises as against retail enterprises [which] will tend to draw money resources from affluent communities into the nonaffluent.”²²⁸ Blackwell was “not too interested in people seeing the black-owned beer tavern or dry cleaner ... I want them to see the Black-owned garment factory in the backwoods of Georgia or just ordinary Mississippi folks running a factory that makes equipment for automobiles.”²²⁹ Crucially, Blackwell proposed developing “factories that sell what they produce out of the community ... We’re not interested in making something for the ghetto and intensifying competition over dollars that don’t exist anyway. We’d rather make shirts for Sears, Roebuck and get a check from Chicago or New York because that’s where the money is.”²³⁰ As Blackwell consistently argued, Black Capitalism was “a fallacious theory ... Most of the money that went into the (federal minority business) program went to set up fast-food franchises, and

²²⁷ “Southern Blacks Help Themselves,” NSCF 1, 24:11, 78.

²²⁸ “Southern Rural Action, Inc. on the Launching Pad,” *Congressional Record*, 16837.

²²⁹ “Taking Care of Business: OMBE shows enterprising Blacks how to ‘bring home the bacon,’” *Ebony Magazine*, September 1978, 146.

²³⁰ “Black Land Loss,” 110.

franchises don't bring dollars into the community; they take dollars out. Besides, it makes us become a servant class and that prospect frightens me to no end."²³¹

In many respects, the recourse to light manufacturing was a utilitarian move to help African American business exploit openings in developing industries; for Blackwell, technology could be a means to challenge the debilitating effects of mechanisation in the agricultural economy. Responding to the 1967 riots, Blackwell noted that "We stand at a critical period in southern history ... We are in the midst of two colliding forces. Onrushing technology is eliminating the need for human hands while medical advances are making more hands available ... The only solution to this problem ... is for the South 'to grow' economically."²³² And though he continued to nurture local agricultural projects and establish a long-term working relationship with the Southwest Alabama Farmers Cooperative, Blackwell firmly believed in expanding and diversifying the skills and industries of the black rural South. In many respects, Blackwell's vision was defiantly long range, and rarely content to rest on a "back to basics" mentality that left rural African Americans at the mercy of a consolidating agricultural sector for employment. How could he, in the "presence of automation, cybernation and mobile atomic energy"?²³³ Encouragingly, such logic was gaining credence in larger circles. As the *Atlanta Journal* saw it, workers at Crawfordville Enterprises were increasing both their personal capital and their value in a quickly changing economy, "producing products that are in demand, and becoming workers and trained in specialties badly needed by the textile industry."²³⁴

²³¹ "Southern Blacks Help Themselves," *Ebony*, 87.

²³² "Agriculture Department Blamed in Recent Riots," *Chapel Hill Weekly*, 18 October 1967.

²³³ "Speech at University of North Carolina," 18.

²³⁴ "It Works!" NSCF, 1, 24:12.

Blackwell's emphasis on establishing a durable economic infrastructure for African American communities can also be seen as a response to his earlier experiences in the civil rights movement, and the issues he had consistently attempted to raise. In particular, SRA sought to remedy the problems of social movements that often struggled to convert activist energy into concrete, material gains. At a pitch Blackwell made to local residents in South Carolina in the 1970s, he argued that:

We've [the SRA] come here to put in your hands manufacturing in cement. You may choose to build houses, churches, community centres. You may choose to give it away. We want to create it, put it in your hands, train people to run it, back out, leaving it in your hands ... We're not talking about adult literacy programs or a voter registration drive but a concrete brick plant that will be here 50 years from now ... We'll forget who led the sit-ins. We'll forget who led the voting rights campaign. But the person who houses the people in this area, their name will be etched in history.²³⁵

Everything SRA engaged in was with an eye to long-term sustainability. Reflecting his concern with SCLC's inability to sustain a positive organisational presence, Blackwell argued that "The main idea is to produce income. Real income—not grants. You run to the end of grants. The enterprise has got to compete, show a profit, and make enough to support its people. We refuse to touch a project here if it doesn't have a real possibility of a continuing existence."²³⁶ In addition, Blackwell levied criticisms at black power-era projects such as Soul City which sought to create new, more prosperous and effective African American communities from scratch. An implicit abandonment of impoverished areas such as the ones SRA worked in, Blackwell argued that building new towns was only a realistic project for those who had easy access to capital, constituencies that were most often middle class and most often white. For Blackwell, it made much more sense "to make

²³⁵ Blackwell, "Southern Blacks Help Themselves," *Ebony*, 84.

²³⁶ Groh, *The Black Migration*, 104.

‘new communities’ out of the old communities that already exist but are woefully underdeveloped.”²³⁷

Over the next few years, SRA began to expand its efforts across the South. Late in 1968, the organisation moved into the Alabama Black Belt. In Greene County, SRA established a co-operative concrete block factory and a home construction fund. An exception to SRA’s “sell out of the community” mantra, the project sought to demonstrate that home-ownership was attainable even for the most deprived of society. Producing cost-efficient housing, complete with three bedrooms, living room, kitchen, bath, and plumbing for around \$3,500 per unit, the idea was soon exported to nearby Wilcox County, as well as Mound Bayou, Mississippi and Plains, Georgia, the hometown of Governor (and future President) Jimmy Carter. One again, the organisation’s work in Greene County re-affirms the ways in which SRA projects were often intimately tied to the racial conflicts that continued to shape southern politics. As a local black preacher, the Reverend Thomas E. Gilmore suggested, the project of affordable black housing and home-ownership was imperative if African Americans were to gain any purchase in local politics. In Greene County, attempts by local African Americans to gain election to a variety of posts had been hampered by the threat of evictions by white landlords. As Gilmore recalled, “I didn’t take it [the threats] seriously a bit, because I thought the white families needed their tenants,”

²³⁷ “New Towns and Old, Black Communities,” *Washington Post*, 14 June 1974; A counterpoint to the history of SRA is the story of former SNCC activist Charles Sherrod’s New Communities organization. As recently as early 2010, Sherrod won a lawsuit against the federal government for USDA discrimination. See “US Approves Settlement for Black Farmers,” *Washington Post*, 19 February 2010, accessed at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/02/18/AR2010021805893.html>, 20 September 2010.

but whites proved they were indeed serious when “people voted for Negro candidates—me in particular—and people got evicted.”²³⁸

In Wilcox County, SRA’s efforts were given vocal support by Coretta Scott King, who would become an ever more visible cheerleader for the group in the years ahead.²³⁹ On June the 28th 1969, the recently-widowed Mrs. King would set aside her grief to visit Camden, where she would address local residents and view the effects of SRA’s work for herself.



3. *Coretta Scott King addresses a crowd in Wilcox County, Alabama*

Clearly impressed, King told the crowd that “With faith we are moving! My husband said, ‘Sometimes you have to move against a condition and work out the details of the plan as the program develops.’ We must spread this spirit to every town and hamlet in the rural South.”²⁴⁰ At that event—after having been harangued by five locals—King put up \$2000

²³⁸ “Block Factory in Greene Country Plans to Build \$3,500 Houses,” *Southern Courier*, 2 July 1967.

²³⁹ In an interview with *Ebony* in 1970, King would tell *Ebony* that SRA was one of the concerns closest to her heart. See “Finally, I’ve Begun to Live Again,” *Ebony*, November 1970, 174.

²⁴⁰ “Living in the Country,” 214.

of the required \$3500 to fund a water system. As one person told her, “Mrs. King, you don’t understand what we’re talking about. When you have to go four miles to get a bucket of water, you have to make the difficult decision of whether to drink it or take a bath.”²⁴¹ Following another fund-raising drive selling fish and chicken sandwiches on weekends, the remaining balance was raised, and the Whiskey Run Water System was born. In a county where seventy-eight per cent of the residents had no piped water, it was a sizeable achievement.

In Perry County, Alabama, SRA’s focus was on strengthening the plight of black farmers, with the organisation instrumental in the establishment of the ten-county Southwest Alabama Farmers Cooperative Association. As an SRA annual report noted, poverty was a problem best addressed if “independent pockets of poverty are joined together.”²⁴² SRA also helped start a small bakery that used soy-bean flour, primarily as a way of improving the protein intake of people in a county where seventy percent of residents relied on federal food subsidies. As one baker put it, “it’s fun to make cookies when you know you can say to a child, ‘Eat these cookies, they’re good for you,’ rather than having to say ‘Don’t eat too many cookies.’ ” Elsewhere in Alabama, in Hale and Dallas counties, SRA established adult literacy and pre-school programmes.²⁴³

SRA efforts did not stop there. In Plains, Georgia—a town in the far Southwest of the state that was home to only seven hundred people—SRA established perhaps its most expansive project. In addition to a brick-making plant and a roof-truss plant capable of producing over sixty trusses a day—an operation where workers received six months

²⁴¹ “Black Land Loss,” 111.

²⁴² “Annual Report of the Southern Rural Action Project,” NSCF 1, 24:12

²⁴³ “Progress Report on CAP Southern Rural Action Projects,” NSCF 1, 24:12

training before they even started work—the project included a community centre costing in excess of \$20,000 dollars (built by local teenagers from scratch) and a day-care centre.



4. Workers at a roof truss plant in Plains, Georgia.

Finally, SRA commenced construction of “Africana Village,” a housing development of fifteen homes costing between \$9,000 and \$15,000, with mortgage payments of between thirty-five and sixty-five dollars a month, dependent on income and family size. In May of 1972, the Village held its groundbreaking ceremonies, with local dignitaries, including L.E. Godwin, the mayor of Plains, in attendance. As Simmie Tellis, the Plains Community Club President put it, “We always wanted to do something and didn’t know what it was. Now we do know and we’re working our hearts out making a chance for the people to stay in their home community.”²⁴⁴ The quality of homes built was far in excess of local people’s

²⁴⁴ “ ‘Africana Village’ Planned in Plains,” *Americus Times-Recorder*, 5 May 1972.

expectations. As one resident exclaimed, “Lord, Maggie, come look—separate places for eating and sleeping!”²⁴⁵

By 1974, the experiment in Plains had been well cemented, and local residents had turned their annual “Community Day” celebration into a week-long event: “The Emancipation Extravaganza.” A celebration held to mark the date of the emancipation proclamation, residents turned out between January 7th and the 13th to recognise their economic progress. As one older local resident put it, “It’s been over a hundred years since we have been free and we are still trying to make it ... I guess we still can make it yet if we work together.”²⁴⁶ At a speech he delivered that week, Blackwell remained steadfast in his belief that full and effective participation in American society depended first and foremost on economic emancipation and independence. As he put it, “If a person is emancipated economically ... he will automatically assume the responsibilities of full citizenship ... Our experiences, especially here in Plains, Ga., have made us steadfast in our beliefs ... It’s amazing how fast and complete the resolutions of social problems are when a family is progressing economically.”²⁴⁷

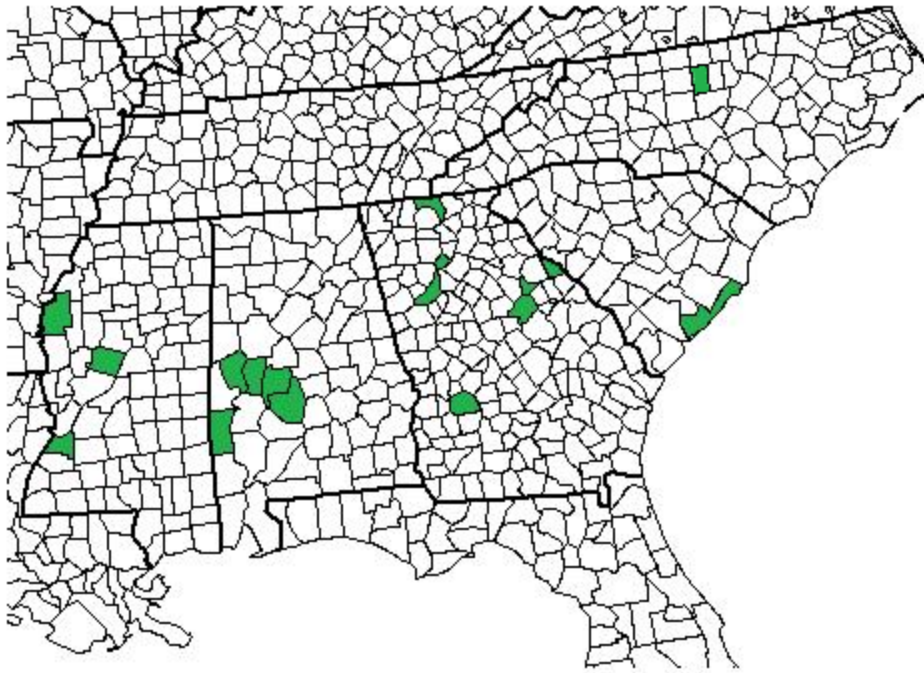
Continuing steadfastly in its work, SRA could by the mid 1970s claim to have touched many more communities across five southern states: North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, South Carolina and Mississippi. In Greene County, Alabama, The “men’s project” of concrete block production was augmented by a sewing co-op that produced pillow-cases, children’s shirts, pants, and dresses, as well as men’s shirts. Employing twenty-two women, the co-op’s ambitions were limited only by a lack of funding and

²⁴⁵ “Living in the Country,” 220.

²⁴⁶ “Community Day in Plains,” *Action Audit*, Vol. 1, No. 2, February, 1974, SSP, 21.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

equipment. As Alice Smith, a worker at the project suggested, “If we had enough machines, we could run as an assembly line and have plenty of garments.”²⁴⁸ Here again, SRA demonstrated its interest in the particular plight of rural black women. As the Rev. Gilmore put it, “Great women like these—in some instances they’re not heard of, but they’re great—[and] are going to change things.”²⁴⁹



5. *Location of Southern Rural Action Operations, 1966 – 1977.*

In Lincolnton County, Georgia, SRA helped to launch the Twilight Sewing Plant, a co-operative enterprise whose name had come about, the association secretary explained, because “For years the Negro has been living in darkness. Now there is some light, at least enough light for us to see the way. Sort of like at twilight.”²⁵⁰ And perhaps most remarkably of all, the residents of the largely white mountain community of Blue Ridge, Georgia,

²⁴⁸ “Sewing Co-Op Gets Results,” *The Southern Courier*, 1-2 July 1967.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁰ Groh, *The Black Migration*, 109.

solicited the help of SRA in establishing a textile factory similar to the one in Crawfordville.

In 1974, SRA—clearly still struggling for money—submitted a proposal to the Department of Labor. As the proposal’s introduction suggests, much of the money applied for would go into strengthening the existing manufacturing enterprises—around thirty—run by SRA. As the company stated in 1973, “It is not anticipated that SRA will, in the near future, undertake any major new ventures.”²⁵¹ This theme of consolidation is apparent in the major points of the 1974 proposal SRA submitted: “1. Form one general manufacturers association and three specific associations. 2. Train 300 individuals—some in building construction, garment manufacturing, graphic arts, woodwork, plastic and artificial marble as a foundation for future expansion and development. 3. Assist 30 local groups in the establishment of 10 new factories.”²⁵² All told, SRA requested \$362,855, the vast majority of which would be used to fund training programs.

In particular, Blackwell’s viewed the establishment of trade associations as a means to increase the economic clout of factories that were still minor in size by comparison to other such enterprises in far more affluent parts of the US. As Southern Rural’s progress report of 1973 put it, such associations would have a number of “significant benefits, such as lending and borrowing equipment, joint bulk buying of raw materials, joint contracting, [a] central repair shop, joint marketing and sharing the costs of research and innovation.”²⁵³ Consolidation was necessary, Blackwell believed, if SRA enterprises were to effectively compete for business from major northern retailers. As he pointed out, not one single SRA

²⁵¹ “Southern Rural Action on the Launching Pad,” *Congressional Record*, 16837.

²⁵² “A Proposal Submitted to the U.S. Department of Labor by Southern Rural Action Inc.,” SSP, 21.

²⁵³ “SRA on the Launching Pad,” 16837.

business could afford a marketing representative, a severe hindrance to acquiring new, and lucrative contracts. As SRA believed, “There is much evidence to support the conclusion that there is work available we need only to go out and get it.”²⁵⁴ Moreover, SRA’s theory of growth—that successful ventures would likely be imitated in nearby localities—depended on the visible success of the existing factories, something that SRA would continue to struggle with as long as they remained “at the mercy of word-of-mouth merchandising.”²⁵⁵

To the end of achieving their second and major goal, SRA had recently founded its own technical college: the Southern Rural Action Institute. Located in a three-storey building in Atlanta containing around 24,000 square feet of space, the SRA Institute’s primary goal was to deepen the skill base of rural workers. As SRA’s 1974-75 bulletin put it, “The SRA institute is similar to other vocational-career development training institutions except that it deliberately seeks to attract trainees from rural communities in the southeastern part of the United States.”²⁵⁶ In particular, the institute deliberately eschewed “traditional” higher education, instead focusing on the people “unable to pursue such an education and who need concentrated learning in a lucrative trade in a minimum period of time.”²⁵⁷ Fully opening its doors, the school merely required that entrants be sixteen years of age and have “evidence of a satisfactory level of seriousness or purpose.” Depending on the length of study, the institute charged between \$430 and \$1270 for enrolment.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁵ “New Towns and Old, Black Communities.”

²⁵⁶ “Southern Rural Action Institute Bulletin, 1974-75 Session,” SSP, box 21.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

Employing fourteen instructors, the SRA Institute could offer a wide array of courses, with some taking up to eighteen months to complete. Programmes in lithography, commercial art, cold type composition, screen printing, photography, plumbing, bricklaying, carpentry, electric wiring and industrial sewing were all offered, most with varying levels of depth and detail available. More than simply training vocational skills, the institute also attempted to offer the rudiments of business management and entrepreneurship. As part of a course in carpentry, for instance, the entire fourth quarter of study would be dedicated to business mathematics, bookkeeping, contracting and business law, and quantity estimation. Other programmes offered instruction in basic communication, marketing, portfolio assembly and human relations. All told, the facility in Atlanta could offer over 200 individual classes that attempted to equip rural men and women for an economic future that was less than likely to include agricultural labour.

Most obviously, the SRA Institute suggests that Blackwell's project was at least in part one of nation building. Graduates of the Institute would, the promotional material suggested, be far better able to "function effectively as wage earners, consumers, householders, parents or citizens."²⁵⁹ In many respects Blackwell was, through anti-poverty initiatives, attempting to create an economically independent, "modern" petty-bourgeoisie. Black men and women needed a "solid underpinning of education that affords ... the skills, knowledge and attitudinal development that will enable them to enter into the mainstream of American life," Blackwell argued. Here then were the countervailing strands of Blackwell's thought, a synthesis of integration and black economic self-determination that attempted to dignify the lives of working-class African Americans through their more

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

effective incorporation into the American economy. In this sense, the history of SRA reinforces Devin Fergus' argument that black power could not escape or fully reject the ascendant regime of liberal, capitalist democracy.²⁶⁰

But all along there remained pragmatic rationalizations for this, too. In particular, Blackwell knew that if rural to urban migration was not to be halted, then rural southerners were leaving their homes woefully underequipped to find work in urban centres. If such men and women only had agricultural experience, then they were destined, Blackwell believed, for the unemployment line. As Blackwell put it, rural migrants comprised the "hard core unemployed," the part of the inner-city population that "has come in from some rural community empty-handed, without marketable vocational skills."²⁶¹ In fact, this argument was part of a critique of the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, whose definition of "employment," Blackwell suggested, was woefully inadequate. For Blackwell, statistical evidence showed only those still tied to the system, not those "thousands of individuals that have not mastered the art of job hunting. Neither does it include those that have been so discouraged that they are no longer looking for a job even though they are unemployed."²⁶² Indeed, Blackwell followed through on his commitment to alleviate the dislocations of rural migration by enrolling prisoners convicted of minor crimes in training programmes. As Blackwell knew, time in jail left such men "no better equipped [to survive in the city] ... We like to think we can do a lot for such a person."²⁶³

As the 1970s wore on, the work of SRA began to receive favourable publicity within corridors of power. Increasingly, Blackwell and SRA had become a *cause célèbre* of

²⁶⁰ See Fergus, *Liberalism, Black Power*.

²⁶¹ "Director's Corner," *Action Audit*, Vol. 1, No. 2, February 1974, SSP, 21.

²⁶² *Ibid.*

²⁶³ "Southern Rural Action," *Atlanta Voice*, 16 March 1974, 6.

a new, post-civil rights black political class that included Coretta Scott King, Maynard Jackson and Andrew Young. On the 23rd of May 1973, Young, a newly-elected Congressman from Georgia stepped before the House of Representatives to offer his praise. Before submitting both an SRA progress report and a financial breakdown into record, Young told his audience that “The men and women who staff Southern Rural Action ... have annually conducted a million-dollar program on an average budget of less than \$300,000 ... this loyal, dedicated group of citizens have been able to create a money flow in excess of \$60 million in the most needy parts of the South.”²⁶⁴

In addition, SRA also received praise from unexpected sources. As Richard Nixon—“father” of Black Capitalism—wrote to Blackwell, “Your successful efforts to enrich the lives of needy families in your area have come to my attention and I want to commend you for your outstanding work.”²⁶⁵ SRA also received local Republican plaudits too, from politicians such as Kentucky Senator Marlow Cook, who could comfortably support such African American activism because it was—at least in his mind—largely non-state administered, and was not attached to any broader initiative that would require significant expansion of federal spending. Even Senator Eugene Talmadge of Georgia, a consistent foe of civil rights legislation, had begun to talk about the necessity of rural development by the early 1970s. Far from embarrassed, Blackwell was comfortable with the way SRA could effectively navigate between the poles of an increasingly partisan and ideological American politics. If anything, such testimony from those on the right was considered a compliment by Blackwell. As he put it to the *National Catholic Reporter*, “If

²⁶⁴ Andrew Young, 93rd Cong., 1st. sess., *Congressional Record*, 23 May 1973, 16836.

²⁶⁵ Richard Nixon to Randolph Blackwell, 23 January 1970, *SRA Institute Bulletin*, SSP.

we can reach people with that wide range of opinion ... I think Southern Rural Action is on the way to something big.”²⁶⁶

Such increased attention (of whatever sort) was certainly not without its benefits. Increasingly, Blackwell began to find access to the policy-making process. As early as 1967, Blackwell had applied to be heard at the National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty in Memphis, writing that he would emphasize the need for “immediate direct attention being given to the problem of employment, housing, clothing and food as they relate to population mobility.”²⁶⁷ Despite his association with the prominent CCAP, there is no evidence to suggest Blackwell’s request to speak was accepted, nor did he attend the conference where Amzie Moore—another civil rights veteran and head of the Child Development Group in Mississippi—testified, amongst others.²⁶⁸

But by 1974, Blackwell was testifying before the Senate Subcommittee on Housing and Urban Affairs, in this instance before a hearing on rural housing.²⁶⁹ In his statement before the committee, Blackwell emphasized the importance of self-determination for rural communities who had historically had little control over their own resources. Blackwell had one specific recommendation, that “public policy be embodied in legislation that provides liberal financial support for non-profit home developers that understand and accept the nature and importance of self-determination and community involvement in practical and

²⁶⁶ “Agency Creates Jobs for Rural Poor,” *National Catholic Reporter*, 9 November 1973, 13.

²⁶⁷ Blackwell to the *National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty*, 4 January 1967, National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty, box 10.

²⁶⁸ A register for the conference suggests Fannie Lou Hamer was in attendance, also.

²⁶⁹ The very title of the committee suggests the ways in which problems of *rural* often seemed counterintuitive to a poverty community focused far more concertedly on the issues facing urban America by the mid-1970s.

programmatic terms.”²⁷⁰ Now with greater access to debates over public housing policy and the economic status of the African American community, Blackwell argued that the problems facing urban planners—that of disintegrating, ill-kept projects—could only be remedied by involving the communities of people they sought to help. For Blackwell, “too long have public employees designed programs to fit their professional preparation with little or no interest in trying to understand the depths and ramifications of the problems they would solve.”²⁷¹ He continued, insisting that “every major city has numerous public buildings that cost taxpayers that now stand empty because the families that they were designed for feel no attachment to those houses and no responsibility for them.”²⁷²

In 1975, Blackwell appeared before a Committee on Jobs and Prices in Atlanta.²⁷³ Conducted by the Joint Economic Committee, the hearing allowed Blackwell to draw attention to the lost promises of an earlier era. As he told the committee, “I feel that you are demonstrating by your presence here today your concern about the unmet goals of the Employment Act of 1946.” But for Blackwell, the spirit of that New Deal era had been largely lost. Though the crisis facing rural America remained just as strong, Blackwell believed that “we are bringing to this hour so little of the imagination and creativity that characterized the early 1930’s and that was so much a part of the legislative intent of the Employment Act of the 1940’s.”²⁷⁴ Though the nation was making “significant progress in reducing discrimination ... relating to race, age, and sex,” Blackwell reminded the

²⁷⁰ *Oversight on Rural Housing Programs: Hearings on 19-21 November Before the Subcommittee on Housing and Urban Affairs of the Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs*, 93rd Cong., 2nd. sess., (1974) .

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*

²⁷² *Ibid.*

²⁷³ *Jobs and Prices in Atlanta, Hearing on 8 December Before the Joint Economic Committee*, 94th Cong., 1st sess., (1975).

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 114.

committee that “as it relates to discrimination against rural communities, the discriminations are mounting daily, creating cesspools of unemployment and human suffering.”²⁷⁵ Moreover, Blackwell pointed out that rural communities continued to be excluded from federal unemployment legislation, arguing that the 1946 Employment Act had yet “to be taken from Washington D.C. ... and activated into jobs and security for the people—particularly rural people.”²⁷⁶

By this point in the mid-1970s, Blackwell’s language had shifted somewhat. This was no longer the moment of community action, the War on Poverty or ascendant American liberalism. Increasingly, Blackwell made his case primarily in the language of business and free enterprise. As he put it, “we’re talking about the opportunity of profits that are made in the traditional American way.”²⁷⁷ In an effort to deflect potential criticism about public involvement in private enterprise, Blackwell pointed out the massive levels of federal spending undertaken in the cause of private enterprise. As he put it, “we build highway systems which subsidize the trucking industry; we build airports to subsidize the airline industry ... [but when] you talk about subsidizing people in rural America and owning a factory that would get them off welfare rolls permanently. The answer is, ‘Oh, we couldn’t afford to subsidize private industry.’”²⁷⁸

This shift in language was also the product of a man fighting for survival, however. Paradoxically, Blackwell’s increasing prominence at the national level was counterbalanced by SRA’s increasingly fraught existence as the 1970s progressed. Indeed, the most persistent problem SRA faced was a lack of financial assistance. Before the Hearing on

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 116.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

Rural Housing in 1974, Blackwell informed the committee that there were “numerous organizations functioning in rural America almost at their own expense doing public service work, and because of the nature of our present-day economy these organizations are threatened with the possibility of having to go out of existence.”²⁷⁹ Visiting SRA headquarters in the early 1970s, a journalist noted the “threadbare” nature of operations, with a staff that at times was comprised of only Blackwell and a temporary secretary. During SRA’s lifespan, it often relied on limited private donations and technical assistance from a diverse group of organisations, including the American Friends Service Committee, the National Sharecroppers Fund, the International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union, the National Council of Negro Women and the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority.²⁸⁰ In addition to the lecture fees Blackwell was able to earn, the organisation’s biggest source of financial assistance was a grant of \$212,000 from the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). As SRA staffer Fred Stokes put it, the organisation was fighting a constantly rising tide; “When we first started no one was talking about the rural. We’ve held this thing together with baling wire, and we’re going to continue the baling wire approach until someone recognizes the effort we’re making.”²⁸¹

The financial plight of SRA was certainly not helped by Blackwell’s refusal to appropriate any of the profits produced by the enterprises he established. If one worked with the organisation, the investment in start-up costs came with no strings attached. As Blackwell explained,

Sure, it would be logical to do it [run the organisation] on the basis that some small percentage of the profits of these enterprises would go to help defray Southern

²⁷⁹ Blackwell, *Jobs and Prices in Atlanta*, 64.

²⁸⁰ “SRA Annual Report,” 10.

²⁸¹ “Black Land Loss,” 111.

Rural's financial problems, but you go into these communities and begin talking about taking back part of the money and people think you're out to hustle again. These people have been hustled enough already.²⁸²

But as Blackwell continued to remind interested parties, meaningful change could be effected on a relatively meagre budget. As Frederick Stokes would put it succinctly, "We don't have a Marshall Plan and we don't think we cured the housing need anywhere ... but we have demonstrated it can be done."²⁸³ Staffers testified to the centrality of Blackwell in making the SRA a functional operation, even in the toughest of circumstances. As one put it, "Dr. Blackwell can just about do anything. Give him a little money and he can do it all."²⁸⁴

It would not be enough, however. By the late 1970s, SRA was attempting to borrow money from the Community Services Administration—a later iteration of the OEO—simply to cover administrative expenses.²⁸⁵ With Blackwell no longer directly running operations (having accepted a post in the Department of Commerce) Frederick Stokes was left with the responsibility of righting a sinking ship. Auditors working for the CSA began to bear down on SRA, pursuing a \$500 dollar accounting discrepancy and minor administrative technicalities.²⁸⁶ Sure enough, Southern Rural Action would soon be no more.

In 1974, SRA had released a pamphlet detailing, over the course of over thirty photographs, the scope of the challenge the organisation had confronted over the preceding

²⁸² "Southern Blacks Help Themselves," *Ebony*, 80.

²⁸³ Frederick Stokes, "Black Land Loss," 111.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁵ "Frederick Stokes to Mr. Walker," 8 September 1977, Record Group 381, Community Services Administration records. .

²⁸⁶ Gary L. Furlong, "Letter to Southern Rural Action," 28 July 1977, RG 381, CSA.

eight years, as well as highlighting some its achievements. Reminiscent of James Agee and Walker Evans' *Let us Now Praise Famous Men*, but probably far more indebted to Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices*, "Living in the Country" began: "There is a national emergency in our country no less severe than if a tornado had swept across it, levelling everything in its path. Each day the process of denuding the countryside and crowding the cities continues, thus ruining both communities."²⁸⁷ Through numerous photographs of decaying housing alongside anxious and despairing residents, the pamphlet testified to the realities of rural poverty that continued to exist well into the twentieth century. There was hope, however. *Living in the Country*'s final photographs showcased neat, modern facilities, the result of SRA efforts. The final photograph showed a sparkling new home, surrounded by crops, entrenched both materially and socially in the southern landscape.

Though Blackwell had increasingly found access to the policy making process, his attempts to put the rural South at the heart of anti-poverty initiatives remained a futile venture. From the Kerner Commission onward, urban issues, de-industrialization and northern unemployment would remain the crucial index of success for what Adolph Reed calls the "academic poverty research industry."²⁸⁸ As Blackwell put it scathingly in 1975, "When the young people of these [migrant] families decide to burn down and blow up the seething slums, their reaction is called civil disorder and many large commissions are established to study why such events occur."²⁸⁹ But as Blackwell believed, such geographical segmentation of American inequality was fundamentally a misreading of the

²⁸⁷ Southern Rural Action, Inc., "Living in the Country," in *Nomination of Benjamin B. Blackburn: Hearings on 10-11 November Before the Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs*, 94th Cong., 1st sess. (1975), 196.

²⁸⁸ Reed, *Class Notes*, 101-8.

²⁸⁹ Blackwell, *Jobs and Prices in Atlanta*, 115.

truly *national* dynamics of poverty production. Indeed for Blackwell, the federal government's interventions in the fabric of rural life had in fact accelerated the urban crisis.

Although he would move on to a major federal post at the Office of Minority Business Enterprise, Blackwell had indeed left an imprint on his "beloved" region. Deeply cognizant of the limits of his project, Blackwell maintained that the goal of SRA was to demonstrate that the "economic, social, health, and other problems in the South can be solved."²⁹⁰ In 1965, before SRA had ever set foot in the South, only seven black-owned manufacturing businesses could claim to employ more than twenty-five people.²⁹¹ By 1973, SRA had facilitated over twenty-million dollars of investment in the cause of black rural poverty.²⁹²

In many respects, Blackwell's work with Southern Rural Action represented the culmination of a long career in African American activism that stretched back to the 1940s. Though the America of the mid-1970s was a far cry from his political beginnings amidst the upheavals of the New Deal era, Blackwell's belief in the necessity of working-class empowerment had remained the constant aspect of his thought. In Greensboro, Blackwell had backed candidates for political office deemed far outside the domain of respectability, and played a leading role in expanding the boundaries of black participation in local politics. And by the mid-1960s, Blackwell was following that basic impulse into the black "backwoods" of the American South. In long-forgotten places such as Plains, Crawfordville and Whiskey Run, Blackwell attempted to reconstruct (and resurrect) communities long written off by the dominant cultural, economic and political narratives shaping both

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 116.

²⁹¹ "A Proposal Submitted to the U.S. Department of Labor by Southern Rural Action Inc.," SSP, 21.

²⁹² For a full financial breakdown of SRA related investments, see Appendix A. Cited in "Southern Rural Action, Inc. on the Launching Pad."

American and African American life. Refusing to exclude the men and women of the rural South from full participation in the promises of American society, Blackwell argued that a philosophy of economic inclusion and integration had to govern approaches to the acute problems of African American poverty in the rural South. The organisation's work, and material legacy, was a testament to that simple premise.



6. *SRA-built house, circa 1974*

4 *In the Corridors of Power: The Office of Minority Business Enterprise, 1977-1981*

As both the memory and material commitment to the Great Society declined precipitously during the 1970s, Southern Rural Action faced an ever-increasing struggle to survive. Yet despite the waning future of his organisation, Randolph Blackwell's career would soon reach new heights. In 1977, Blackwell was appointed by Secretary of Commerce Juanita M. Kreps to the head of the Office of Minority Business Enterprise (OMBE). A legacy of Richard Nixon, the agency was established in 1969 as a major component of the then-president's Black Capitalism initiative. Designed to assist in establishing African American businesses and to offer continuing technical and management support through the early stages of growth, the OMBE had to that point consistently "looked better on paper than it actually worked."²⁹³ Through the first 8 years of its operation, the office had enjoyed only tenuous support from successive Republican presidencies, often lacking both the funds and adequate management to function effectively.²⁹⁴

Now past his fiftieth birthday, Blackwell would take the helm of an office that the newly elected Carter administration had publicly committed to revitalizing. As the *Atlanta Journal & Constitution* reported, "the Carter administration teemed into Washington and rekindled 'a sense of excitement' among the agency's 265 employees."²⁹⁵ For Kreps, "equality will not come about by some natural evolutionary process ... Our moral charge is

²⁹³ "Dr. Randolph T. Blackwell: New Leadership for OMBE," *about...time*, August 1977, 8.

²⁹⁴ "Four Have a Dream, Work to Realize It" *Atlanta Journal & Constitution*, 21 August 1977.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

to make of stale promises a fresh reality—a reality in which every American can feel he or she is an equal participant in our economic system.”²⁹⁶ In numerous ways, Blackwell well fit the description of a man fit to guide the OMBE into new and more fruitful territory. In addition to receiving letters of support from high-profile public figures including Coretta Scott King and Joseph McKinney, treasurer of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Blackwell’s case could not have been harmed by his earlier work in Plains, Georgia: Jimmy Carter’s hometown. Perhaps most importantly, Blackwell’s decade-long practical experience in African American manufacturing and economic development, alongside the wide-ranging intellectual capabilities of a man who had served for numerous years as a university educator, made him uniquely qualified amongst a generation of African American activists to make the transition from grass-roots organising to the corridors of power in Washington, D.C. Moreover, Blackwell’s commitment to the cause of minority business could not be called into question. Re-stating a familiar refrain of economic integration following his appointment, Blackwell asserted wholeheartedly that “It is in the best interest of this nation, of its people, of its businesses, and of its industries that minorities become equal partners ... I happen to believe that Americans can prosper fully only when Americans in general prosper.”²⁹⁷

Heading a federal office would be a dramatically different challenge, however. As the *Afro-American Tribune*, a Washington newspaper noted, the nation’s capital was a city of “politicians and political-minded bureaucrats, a city of pseudo-scholars who have made or broken black programs with their typewriters, and a city where change and thrust is

²⁹⁶ “OMBE Serves the Minority Community,” *Afro-American Tribune*, 24 December 1977.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

measured more in speeches than in results.”²⁹⁸ But perhaps most importantly, Blackwell’s appointment to head the OMBE had also installed a leading critic of the existing paradigm of black economic development. Taking up the challenge posed—rhetorically, at least—by the Carter administration, Blackwell attempted to reform the long-floundering agency and fundamentally alter its approach to the problem of minority business development. As Blackwell saw it, the OMBE had to move away from assisting small-scale, “mom and pop” enterprises to sound, fiscally responsible businesses with major growth potential. By funding only limited enterprises in urban centres, Blackwell argued, the OMBE had curtailed any meaningful capital accumulation within the African American community. As he put it, “minorities have been locked into the one-shot type of businesses—laundromats, cleaners.” “Surely these have to be a part of the whole picture,” Blackwell noted, “but every aspect [of economic development]—including becoming part of the large corporations—must be utilized.”²⁹⁹

Crucially, Blackwell argued that minority business had to be tied to emerging industries where the opportunity to gain an economic foothold was more realistic. As Blackwell told *Ebony* in 1978,

It’s too late, in the main, for minorities to be talking about getting into the airplane building business. The industry is too mature and we’re not likely to handle the kind of money that would let us into airplane building or owning steel mills ... but there are certain industries that are just breaking and we want to get in on the ground floor and grow with them. Energy is wide open, and, in cities like Atlanta and Miami the growth potential for minorities is greater than it is in, say, New York, where everything is wrapped up.³⁰⁰

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁹ “Solve Race Issue, Federal Official Urges Businessmen,” *Los Angeles Times*, 23 March 1978.

³⁰⁰ “Taking Care of Business,” *Ebony*, 146.

As Blackwell saw it, his agency had a responsibility to plan for future economic developments that could assist minority communities. As he put it, “We [the OMBE] ought to be able to look at [the] economy, determine its direction and encourage business to go in that direction.”³⁰¹ Assistance would be more valuable, Blackwell argued, if the OMBE could accurately inform potential entrepreneurs that “this is the coming economic area and you ought to get in on it while the money you have in your pocket will allow you ... because if you wait 20 years from now, it is going to be such a mature industry that you will not have the kind of money to get in on it.”³⁰² For too long, Blackwell argued, had the OMBE been content to lend merely assistance to existing minority businesses that were struggling to stay afloat. Rather than sinking money into economic sectors with low profit ceilings, the agency had to be more concerned with creating a durable capital base for African Americans. “I happen to believe that all of it is a matter of creating equity ... successful industry means jobs and that is good,” Blackwell argued, “but minorities owning a share in growth industries—that is the way you change the economic status of minorities in this country.”³⁰³

For Blackwell, two interrelated areas—new technology and energy—could become the heartbeat of a revitalized minority business community. During the gas crisis of the late 1970s, it seemed an extremely logical avenue to pursue. As Blackwell put it, “Look, for example, at the booming price of petroleum from overseas. Find out if alcohol fuel can be manufactured in this country, from grain grown by Americans, on American farms, processed in American plants and distributed by American workers. If so, reduce the

³⁰¹ “OMBE Director Touts Imagination,” *Ravenswood Post*, Vol. 27, No. 17, 18 October 1978.

³⁰² Blackwell, *about...time*, August 1977.

³⁰³ “OMBE Serves the Minority Community,” *Afro-American Tribune*, 24 December 1977.

country's trade deficit, provide jobs for Americans, build a new market for farmers, and go into ethanol production."³⁰⁴ For Blackwell, exploring new energy possibilities was part of a broader imperative for black businessmen to be at the forefront of innovation. Addressing a community meeting of local businessmen in East Palo Alto, Blackwell pleaded with listeners to "Turn your imagination and creativity loose ... If not, we'll [minorities] close out the 20th century in the same shape we're in now or worse."³⁰⁵

Blackwell's goals were far from establishing a framework of federal handouts to the African American community, however. Putting it succinctly at a public policy commission in May of 1978, Blackwell argued that "Welfare and support payments are not a prudent investment of our tax dollars. Minority business development is."³⁰⁶ In place of singular federal action, Blackwell envisioned a lasting alliance between the OMBE, the private sector and minority communities. Echoing the public pronouncements of the Carter Administration, Blackwell noted that the "OMBE and the private sector of the nation's business community are singing from the same song book ... comprehensive development of minority business enterprise must occur in the private sector."³⁰⁷ And in remarks before the National Business League's 78th Annual Convention—an organisation formed in 1900 by none other than Booker T. Washington—Blackwell argued that the minority business community had a fundamental role to play in the rebirth of African American economic and social life. "This alliance," Blackwell believed, "will be a managerial and organizational

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁵ "OMBE Director Touts Imagination," *Ravenswood Post*, Vol. 27, No. 17, 18 October 1978.

³⁰⁶ "OMBE Director Testifies to Need For Private Sector, Government and Public to Share Burdens," *Louisville Defender*, 4 May 1978.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

framework through which joint or collaborative undertakings between government and the Minority Private Sector can be planned and implemented.”³⁰⁸

To such ends, Blackwell began to administer grants to projects across the country. Perhaps most notably, the OMBE was crucial in helping the Southwest Alabama Farmers Cooperative—a group Blackwell had helped get off the ground in the early 1960s—establish a “gasohol” fuel company in Selma. The SWAFC were awarded a grant of \$86,352 dollars to test the feasibility of using a motor fuel made in part from corn and farm vegetation. As Albert Turner, head of the Cooperative argued, the use of “gasohol,” a far cheaper form of fuel, could potentially reverse the trend of declining black agriculture, a process accelerated by rising fuel prices in the late 1970s. Running the project with Albert Hubbard, a former bootlegger, Turner built a distillery from the most rudimentary of materials: old garbage containers, gas tanks and reused steel piping.³⁰⁹ Buoyant after a series of successful demonstrations, Turner informed the Dallas *Morning News* that while he would “leave the big picture to the government ... I have seen what we can do here on the local scene.”³¹⁰

For Blackwell, the gasohol project was an extension of his work with Southern Rural Action. In an area where agriculture was increasingly unprofitable, the establishment of the gasohol unit was envisioned as a way to afford local farmers a supplementary outlet for their crops.³¹¹ As he told the Selma *Times-Journal*, “Selma is the center ... We are talking about revitalizing the agricultural section of Alabama and the agricultural section of

³⁰⁸ “Blackwell Proposes Alliances with Private Sector,” Lawton *Oklahoma Eagle*, 19 October 1978.

³⁰⁹ “Legal ‘Moonshine’ Smooth on the Highway,” Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, 20 April 1978.

³¹⁰ “Black Farmers Keen on Gasohol,” Dallas *Morning News*, 13 May 1978.

³¹¹ “Huge Success: SWAFCA has demonstration of using moonshine as fuel,” Selma *Times-Journal*, 28 January 1978.

the entire United States.”³¹² And unsurprisingly, given the larger context of the gas crisis, the project attracted considerable attention. On October the 19th 1977, “Gasohol Day” was held in Washington, D.C., an event attended both by numerous politicians and entertainers that included James Brown, the Godfather of Soul. Demonstrating the success of their endeavours, SWAFC members drove a gasohol-powered tractor around the grounds of the Capitol.³¹³

Efforts in gasohol production were but a small portion of OMBE work during Blackwell’s tenure, however. In Anguilla, Mississippi, the agency arranged financial assistance for Assembly Manufacturing Corporation., which produced high-tech car parts for pick-up trucks. As Reuben Anderson, President of Assembly noted, the significance of a successful black business transcended immediate material gains: “It’s been a help to Blacks in Anguilla to see a plant operated by their own people,” Anderson noted. “Black owners, Black managers and Black supervisors can mean a lot to people: to have young Blacks, especially young Black mothers, with a job being treated fairly can mean a lot.”³¹⁴ Similar projects were pursued across the nation. In Hilton Head, North Carolina, the OMBE established a co-operative to help black fishermen navigate the increasing complexities of the industry.³¹⁵ Blackwell also pursued links with the World Community of Al Islam, established a new housing project in Fort Valley, Georgia, and helped nurture a T-Shirt manufacturing project in inner-city Los Angeles.³¹⁶ Similar projects abounded in diverse

³¹² Blackwell, “Governor Briefed on Selma,” ROLM.

³¹³ “OMBE Sponsored ‘Gasohol’ Project Succeeds,” *Atlanta World*, 20 July 1978.

³¹⁴ “Taking Care of Business,” *Ebony*, 146.

³¹⁵ “OMBE Aids Black Fishermen and Farmers in North Carolina,” *Louisville Defender*, 4 May 1978.

³¹⁶ “Inner City Youth Learn Managerial Skills Through T-shirt Project,” *Louisville Defender*, 4 May 1978; *San Francisco Sunday Post* (Jun 28, 1978); “Ground Broken for Self-Help Project,” *Fort Valley Leader Tribune*, 14 July 1977.

areas such as home insulation, a recycling project designed to help black veterans, food services, clothing production and animal breeding.³¹⁷

As his efforts with the OMBE make clear, Blackwell's thought had by the late 1970s crystallised into a synthesis of integration and black economic autonomy that responded to the political realities of post-civil rights America and the continuing difficulties of African American community building, poverty and business development. As he told *Ebony* late in his career, "I'm damn frightened to be living in a world where all blacks have to depend on white people to exist. I'm not saying we all need to be manufacturers, but we sure need to have *some*."³¹⁸ But by developing African American business prospects, Blackwell viewed his project (perhaps ironically, given that the OMBE remained an easy target for people vehemently opposed to the idea of affirmative action) as a means to consign issues of race to the dustbin of history. Advocating cooperation within the business community across the racial divide, Blackwell saw healthy black enterprise as a means to "get the issue of race off the American agenda so that attention can be turned to problems infinitely more complicated."³¹⁹ To that end, Blackwell handed out OMBE Awards of Excellence to businesses that furthered the cause of inter-racial economic cooperation. Most prominently, one award was given to a white-owned Mississippi bank that had consistently offered financial support to African American business. At a ceremony attended by Senators James Eastland and John Stennis, as well as civil rights veteran Aaron Henry (another proponent of black economic development), the First Mississippi National Bank Chairman Paul McMullan informed listeners that "the future

³¹⁷ "Taking Care of Business," *Ebony*, 146-50.

³¹⁸ "Southern Blacks Help Themselves," *Ebony*, 87.

³¹⁹ "Solve Race Issue, Federal Official Urges Businessmen," *Los Angeles Times*, 23 March 1978.

growth of the entire Mississippi community depends on participation of minorities in the economic life of the state.”³²⁰

Indeed, Blackwell’s commitment was to a broadly envisioned definition of minority business development that extended to disenfranchised communities beyond the borders of African American life. In May 1978, Blackwell visited Puerto Rico to participate in the Convention for Latin Exchange. As *El Mundo*, a San Juan newspaper reported, “Blackwell could not let pass this opportunity for vital information exchange about the economic and social conditions that faces the Hispanics, since he considers himself a representative and defender of this and other ethnic minority groups.”³²¹ In addition to attending the convention, Blackwell toured the island, visiting the local OMBE offices and inspected projects begun by his agency.

Blackwell’s desire to enact his vision of minority empowerment through the OMBE soon encountered serious difficulties, however. In a memo written by Carter aide Pauline Schneider, Blackwell was accused of inept management, poor performance, and potential legal violations with regard to funding and apportionment of federal money.³²² Such accusations even made it into the public domain, with both prominent columnists and the New York *News World* publishing reports of “administrative chaos” and “questionable grants to applicants” that they argued were directly attributable to the OMBE director.³²³ As the Washington, D.C. *Spotlight* put it, “Blackwell’s answer to questions ... is to fly into a

³²⁰ “Leading Mississippi Bank Honored for Support of Black Business,” Louisville *Defender*, 4 May 1978.

³²¹ “Blackwell Defiende a Hispanos Y a Otros Grupos Minoritarios,” *El Mundo*, 29 May 1978.

³²² Pauline Schneider to Jack Watson, (September 12, 1980) Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Atlanta, Ga.

³²³ “Civil Rights Leader May Be Faced With Scandal,” Omaha Northwest Sun, 2 February 1978; “Gross Distortions Cited in Aid to Minority Firms,” New York *News World*, 8 May 1978.

race and accuse his critics of being motivated solely by ‘racism.’ ”³²⁴ Though the veracity of such reports are hard to verify, it remains clear that the Department of Commerce and Blackwell were headed in markedly different directions.

In April 1979, Blackwell was appointed—or rather, demoted—to a new position as the head of the specially created Office of Minority Enterprise Program Development (OMPED), an agency that was to be headquartered in Atlanta. As Pauline Schneider noted, Blackwell was re-assigned as a means to avoid causing an unnecessary confrontation with his steadfast supporters amongst the black political class. Indeed, a powerful lobby, including Coretta Scott King, Jesse Jackson, Andrew Young and Dorothy Height had formed what Schneider termed the “Randy Blackwell Committee,” a pressure group designed to see the civil rights veteran remain in his job. As they wrote in a petition to President Carter, “we ... are greatly interested in the “growth industries” theory of economic development ... [and] we are planning a national mobilization so that you can have the benefit of knowing the widespread support that exists in the country for the continuation of this office.”³²⁵

But as numerous internal documents from the Carter Administration make clear, Blackwell found no happier home in his new position. Now working from Atlanta, Blackwell again pushed ambitious plans for his new office. Writing amidst a period of recession and spiralling inflation, Blackwell argued that “Conscientious examination exposes a not too free enterprise system in which the minority commerce community has been deliberately and effectively been denied ... [access] to production and marketplace

³²⁴ Washington D.C. *Spotlight*, 24 April 1978.

³²⁵ The National Committee To Save the Office of Minority Enterprise Program Development to Jimmy Carter, August 1980, ROLM.

opportunities.”³²⁶ Blackwell’s attempts to ameliorate this situation proved increasingly futile, however. Following the submission of a series of “Mission Projections,” Commerce Department Deputy Undersecretary Frederick Schenck argued that Blackwell’s proposals appeared to have “a gap between ... objectives and the methods offered to reach them.” Putting it bluntly, Schenck informed Blackwell, “the project areas you have mentioned are very broad ones, and I feel it might be helpful to focus on fewer projects so as to better target and use your resources.”³²⁷

Clearly annoyed, Blackwell took his complaints to Louis Martin, one of President Carter’s top aides. In a long and angry letter, Blackwell argued that Schenck’s complaints were insubstantial, and worked to “becloud the fact that we are trying to establish a functioning unit of government that can serve in the citizenry in line with the President’s message of January.”³²⁸ Perhaps more than anything, the missive suggests that the administration’s waning financial commitment to the OMEPD was behind much of the disagreement. As Blackwell wrote to Martin, “This situation is intolerable. Our total project budget for all that we had hoped to do for this fiscal year is only one million dollars. OMBE has grantees that receive more than one million dollars for their single program.”³²⁹

As much as anything, Blackwell’s time as head of the OMEPD dramatized the chasm between his long-term vision for the rejuvenation of minority economic life and the more prosaic realities of limited political commitment—at least at the federal level—to such an endeavour. In the Office’s first annual report, Blackwell dwelled on the potential of numerous avenues, including international trade with West African nations and the

³²⁶ “Plan for the OMEPD,” ROLM.

³²⁷ Frederick Schenck, “Response to OMEPD Proposals,” ROLM.

³²⁸ Blackwell to Louis Martin, 10 August 1979, ROLM.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*

expansion of gasohol production to twenty-five new counties.³³⁰ Indeed, Blackwell and a delegation visited both Liberia and Nigeria in an attempt to assist in the establishment of similar manufacturing enterprises on the other side of the Atlantic. As Blackwell argued, “the rationale for this project is that it can be used as a demonstration of what can be done in a practical way in international trade and as a catalyst for more of the same.” Returning to more familiar territory in the American South, Blackwell highlighted a new OMEPD-sponsored venture, the Mid Delta Rabbitry Venture Cooperative. Designed to produce valuable pelt, Blackwell believed the project could ultimately employ over 1,500 people in an area largely populated “by black and economically disadvantaged persons.”³³¹

These were the waning days of his career, however. Though Blackwell had been awarded both the Martin Luther King, Jr. Nonviolent Peace Prize and the National Bar Association’s Equal Justice Award in recent years, his time as a public official was drawing to a close. As syndicated columnist Jack Anderson—the man responsible for pursuing those allegations of financial discrepancy—put it, Blackwell was “a good man in the wrong job.”³³² Whatever the truth of that particular statement, Blackwell soon had more pressing things on his mind. Diagnosed with stomach cancer, Blackwell’s remaining days would be spent at home in Atlanta, away from the politics of Washington, D.C. And on May 21, 1981, Blackwell passed away. He was only 53 years of age. In his obituary in the *New York Times*, Blackwell’s contribution was succinctly identified. First and foremost, Blackwell’s death represented the cruel loss of “a leader in helping poor blacks in the South.”³³³ His funeral was conducted at the Central United Methodist Church on the campus of Atlanta

³³⁰ “First Annual Report: Office of Minority Enterprise Program Development,” ROLM.

³³¹ *Ibid.*

³³² Anderson, “Blackwell: A Good Man in the Wrong Job.”

³³³ “Randolph T. Blackwell, a Leader in Helping Poor Blacks in the South,” *New York Times*, 23 May 1981, 21.

University on the 25th of May, four days after his death. Though a painfully early end, it was surely a life well lived.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the two decades following *Brown vs. Board of Education* in the early 1970s, Blackwell looked back on an era that had clearly produced great strides, but as of yet had been unable to produce the kind of society he continued to hope for. Acknowledging the limitations of the civil rights movement in *New South*, Blackwell admitted that disadvantaged communities were still unable to exert much meaningful influence on their own destinies: “There isn’t enough muscle in the black muscle in the black community, enough muscle in the Puerto Rican community; there isn’t enough muscle in the Mexican community or the poor white community to do business with the system,” Blackwell wrote. The idea that society could be remade on the terms of people still flickered in his mind, however. As Blackwell continued to believe, “we are talking about getting together and articulating what would be the kind of society that would be wholesome and desirable for everybody, and not for a few.”³³⁴

By the end of his life, Blackwell had travelled a long road through various dimensions of African American activism, and had settled on the development of business and entrepreneurship as the most profitable courses for black people to pursue. Focused on the implications of American modernity for those most acutely confronted by its limitations, Blackwell sought redress by equipping poor black folk to prosper in an economy that increasingly moved away from agricultural production. How had Blackwell reached this point, and what about his previous experiences enabled him to engage the possibility of a “New Destiny for the South”? And what convinced him to address the rural South in particular? In many respects, Blackwell remained an urbanite, a man whose home

³³⁴ Blackwell, “Perspective on the Brown Decision,” 16.

was in what Devin Fergus recently labelled the “cosmopolitan South.”³³⁵ As Blackwell said in 1967, “I shall not undertake, as a non-farm person, to outline a comprehensive program for improvement ... I shall instead make certain suggestions for consideration by thoughtful people wherever they live.”³³⁶

Foundational to Blackwell’s evolution was, of course, his roots in Greensboro, and his earliest experiences that inscribed a belief in the dignity of working-class black life. From his very beginnings, Blackwell had fought to include marginalised people in a range of democratic processes to which they historically had little access. Focusing, like Ella Baker, on the street-corner drunk who would be passed over by political elites, Blackwell argued that “democracy” would hold only shallow meaning as long as pre-articulated notions of respectability continued to exclude many working-class men and women from having a say in shaping their own lives. For Blackwell, the ultimate goal would remain increasing black political leverage in local struggles. This was not “radical democracy,” as Barbara Ransby has argued of Baker, but a pragmatic challenge to a black leadership class that was at least partially complicit in dampening working-class protest and strengthening the foundations of white supremacy. For Blackwell, process could never be prioritised over final outcomes.

Equally important in the evolution of Blackwell’s thought was his education. Through numerous years in university education, both as a student and a teacher, Blackwell undoubtedly sharpened his analysis of the particular problems of African American life. In particular, Blackwell’s training in the social sciences deepened his appreciation for the various social forces and economic factors that shaped the black experience, particularly in

³³⁵ Fergus, 133.

³³⁶ “Civic Heads Unite to Fight Poverty,” *New York Times*, 7 November 1965.

the South. Going forward, Blackwell refused to view problems simply in terms of southern racism and intransigence, but rather through the lens of political economy. Despite Blackwell's work in the vanguard of the civil rights movement, he never would have been satisfied with the achievement of legislative and constitutional goals. As Blackwell knew, the acute degradations facing many African Americans, both North and South, were "infinitely more complex."

By the early 1960s, Blackwell had returned to activism with the Voter Education Project. Though Blackwell's time with the organisation was relatively brief, his work in some of the most deprived, and hostile areas of the South left a lasting impression. Though Blackwell was a southerner by birth and by identity, he had largely operated in more placid, cosmopolitan surroundings for the first thirty-five years of life. But as he discovered one dark night in 1963, Greenwood, Mississippi was nothing like Greensboro, North Carolina. Crucially, Blackwell's work between 1963 and 1964 confirmed the spatial dimensions of his future activism. In the rural South, Blackwell had re-discovered the sharp end of American capitalism, and from that point forward he committed himself to addressing the particular problems facing the residents of such areas. Blackwell, in many senses, had discovered his constituency. Moreover, Blackwell's work with the VEP confirmed the importance of the prosaic forms of activism—voter-registration, community building, and education—that although low-profile could generate more lasting transformations than direct-action protests. It was a lesson Blackwell would not forget.

To fully understand Blackwell's direction in his post-SCLC career, one has to acknowledge both his conflicts within SCLC and the larger historical moment that confronted civil rights workers following the successes of 1964 and 1965. Like many of his

colleagues in the struggle, Blackwell understood that the movement was at a crossroads, with a variety of potential paths to choose between. Blackwell's belief in the centrality of economics was not enough to convince him to chart the course he did, however. Rather, Blackwell's intellectual dispositions were confirmed by a larger demographic shift that saw many black southerners leave the rural South in search of opportunities in the urban North and West. Moreover, Blackwell seized on larger developments in American political culture, securing money from War on Poverty initiatives that he knew could provide the financial backbone for a concerted attack on black economic disadvantage. Ultimately, a confluence between these new social realities and Blackwell's intellectual evolution convinced him that his efforts had to be centred on the rural South. In so many words, Blackwell's politics in the post-civil rights era cannot be fully explained by any latent philosophical convictions; this was not a straight line between Marcus Garvey and African American economic empowerment in the 1970s, but rather a deeply contingent choice that could not be fully predicted by Blackwell's previous actions and experiences.

Intriguingly, Blackwell's focus on both the UNIA and populism suggests the ways in which contemporary developments could be shaped by the *memory* of historical antecedents. To understand Blackwell's interest in economic activism, one must come to terms with the way he understood narratives of earlier insurgencies, and the ways in which he acknowledged both the potential of such protest and the inherent limitations of earlier strategies. Rather than a product of an endlessly self-reproducing history of African American struggle ordered around institutions or organisations, Blackwell forged new forms of activism by creating narratives from earlier struggles that took on new resonance

in radically altered contexts. A historical consciousness, in other words, markedly influenced the direction of Blackwell's career and the programmes he chose to pursue.

Moreover, Blackwell's career suggests the ways in which African American activism can never be explained simply in terms of mechanistic responses to exploitation, or understood solely appositional" narrative. Though consistently idiosyncratic in his approaches to the problems of poverty and democratic participation, Blackwell's work was embedded in a series of discourses—including the history of African American activism itself—that defined the boundaries of his life and work. As Gareth Stedman Jones has so influentially argued, "Language disrupts any simple notion of the determination of consciousness by social being because it is itself part of social being. We cannot therefore decode political language to reach a primal and material expression of interest since it is the discursive structure of political language which conceives and defines interest in the first place."³³⁷ Ultimately, Blackwell's work was defined by mid-twentieth century liberalism and democratic capitalism, hegemonic formations that he could never fully transcend. This point remains essential to the larger project of tracing the contours of African American political struggle in the twentieth century. Resistance must be placed in dialogue with the larger assumptions about society, politics and culture that underpinned activists' efforts.

Though Blackwell's focus on economic self-determination for poor African Americans ultimately reinforced such larger discourses, his insistence on locating his activism in the South can also be understood as an obvious counterpoint to established narratives of region that had constructed the South as a place solely of exploitation, terror and ultimately hopelessness. Rather than engaging in simple "resistance" or

³³⁷ Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working-Class History, 1832-1982* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 22.

“accommodation,” Blackwell’s activism co-opted existing paradigms of “progress,” “enterprise” and “employment” to address the immediate material needs of long-impooverished southerners. Evincing a radicalism couched in a language that American liberalism could accept during the black power era, Blackwell’s work successfully navigated an increasingly fractured political landscape in the name of *people*. It is perhaps for this that he should be remembered.

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APPENDIX A

Total Money Flow of Southern Rural Action Projects, 1973.

<i>State/County</i>	OED	EDA	Farmers Home Administration	Community Enterprises	Private Sector	New Industry	New Construction	HEV	Total
Georgia/Taliaferro	\$900,000	\$4,000	\$60,000	\$124,800	\$42,000				\$1,130,800
Georgia/Lincoln				\$3,000,000	70,000				\$3,070,000
Alabama/Wilcox	735,000			50,000	80,000		\$200,000		\$1,065,000
Alabama/Madison				240,000	15,000				\$255,000
Georgia/Hancock				120,000	7,030,000				\$7,150,000
Alabama/Perry				30,000	28,000				\$58,000
Mississippi/Sunflower	50,000			18,000	7,000				\$75,000
Georgia/Sumter				20,000	120,000		252,000	116,000	\$508,000
Alabama/Hale				140,400	8,000				\$148,400
Georgia/Mineral Bluff				423,600	9,000				\$438,600
Mississippi/Claiborne				12,000	56,000				\$68,000
Alabama/Choctaw				72,000	38,000				\$110,000
Mississippi/Bolivar				70,000	22,000		3,768,000		\$3,860,000
Alabama/Greene				84,000	111,000	\$350,000			\$545,000
North Carolina/Alamance		500,000			56,000				\$556,000
Southwest Alabama Farmers Cooperative (1967 Budget)	400,000	75,000	800,000						\$1,305,000
Total	\$2,085,000	\$579,000	\$860,000	\$4,410,800	\$7,722,000	\$350,000	\$4,220,000	\$116,000	\$20,342,800

APPENDIX B

Photographs of Southern Rural Action

Sources: "Living in the Country," an SRA pamphlet and *Ebony*



Outhouse, early 1970s Alabama.



Blackwell and SRA staff, Atlanta.



The interior of an SRA-built house.

Meeting to discuss SRA Proposals, Camden, Alabama.



